

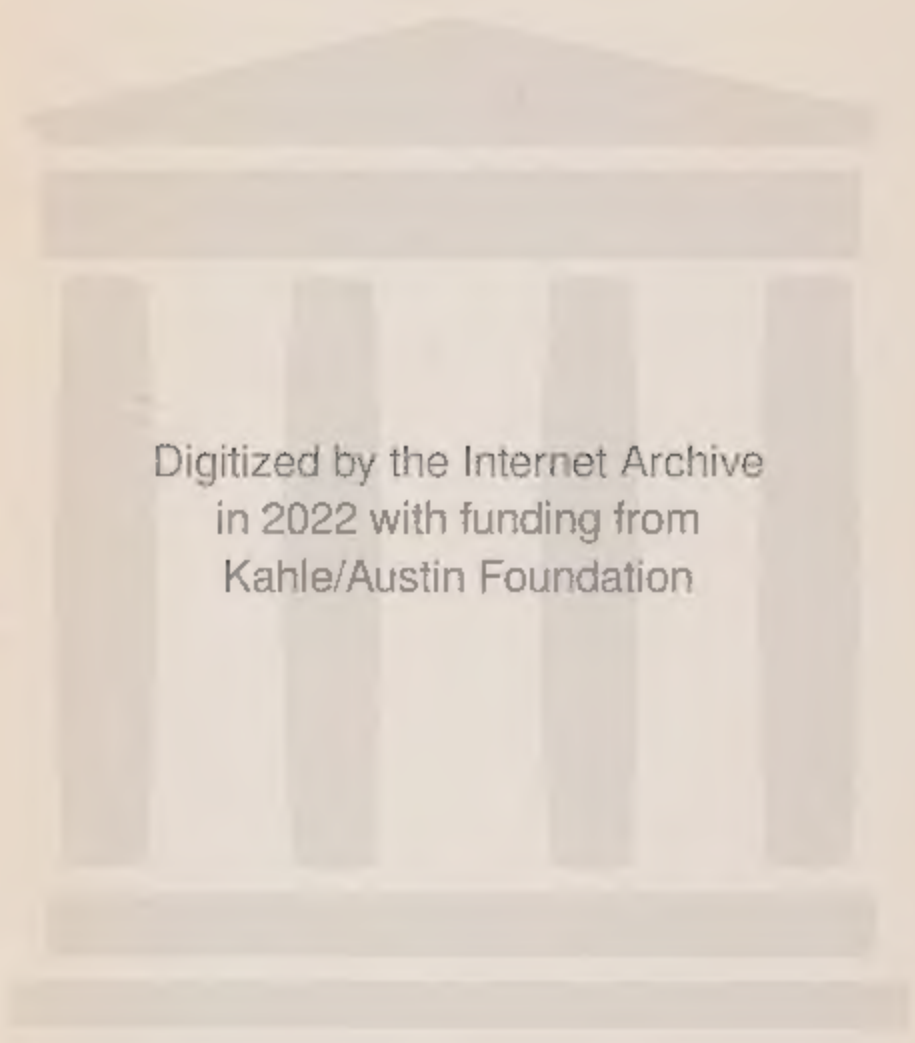
John Lymington

A creature from time immemorial returns to
reclaim its heritage...the planet Earth!

TEN MILLION YEARS TO FRIDAY



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MEETING WITH YESTERDAY

Up in the shadows of the great center of the barn a glow began. Fear was muscle-locking in the darkness of the barn, watching a slow-turning globe of gas gain reality and color from a million years ago.

Suddenly it was complete, hanging in nothing, solid, pear shaped. Camm watched the frightful vision.

"You're looking at the Earth as it was eons ago. This is the picture of Earth the stars saw long before history began."

There was a terror in me nothing physical could have created. It was like suddenly looking God in the face when you just said you didn't believe. I stared at the horrid thing, at the vast seas and the shapes of land I couldn't recognize.

"It's blasphemy!" I yelled at him. "It's a distortion, an electronic trick!" I raged at him, and ran out of the place into the night. The thing seemed to come after me . . .

TEN MILLION YEARS TO FRIDAY

John Lymington

LANCER BOOKS



NEW YORK



A LANCER BOOK

TEN MILLION YEARS TO FRIDAY

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I

St. Cary is dead. In a thousand years of history this never happened before. Looking out of the big open windows on to the square, there is one last sign of living man to be seen. A white car at the far corner, a blue light flashing on its roof like a nervous tic. There is a man inside, but I can't see down into the car. He is the last one. The others have all gone, thirteen thousand people who made the town alive.

The sensation is choking, freezing, despite the heat of the September morning. In all ten years I have known this town there was never a silence like this. At the darkest midnight there was always a long-distance truck rumbling to somewhere, following the blazing tunnel of its lights. Always some stray, sin-delighted dog running cockily through the empty streets, a sleek black midnight cat slinking up a wall out of his way. Always lights on at some windows. Always something to show that people still lived. Never a down as silent as this. There had always been the soft whine of the milk floats somewhere, the quiet invasion of the post office car park under the blazing lights of the sorting-room windows. The humming of the mail train pulling out for Truro and Penzance.

In this greyness before the sun, all these things have gone. There is nothing now but the idle flapping of a torn newsbill down on the pavement, leaning against our shop front. The bill, slashed out by Craike with his big felt pencil: "St. Cary To Be Evacuated: Invasion by Alien Imminent."

Nobody in St. Cary knew what an alien was. Everybody east of the River Tamar was a foreigner, anyhow, no matter what country he came from. Nobody in Cornwall bothered about aliens as well.

Most of them still think Camm did it all. That he had some death ray up there by Caradon Hill. Something ordinary, like that. Some, thinking harder, guessed Camm had created some Frankenstein monster which had got him in the end. After all, Camm was a scientist, and all scientists were cranks and killed people. I remember taking a sample through the town about what people thought scientists had done for mankind. Ten said invented rockets, thirty hadn't ever thought about it; ninety said invented fission bombs.

When I asked about drugs, electronics and a few other things with which they lived, their answers meant these things came from whatever name was on the bottle or TV set. Even then they answered me soft, because they knew scientist Camm was my adopted uncle.

"Well, of course, some scientists are quite nice, really. . . . Personally, I mean, of course . . ."

It was so shattering I got a short programme on Western Television, interviewing these representatives of one-man-one-vote society. Perhaps the mess we are all in isn't the leader but the LCM and his one vote.

But he's gone now. Blaming Camm. Frightened of Camm and of all scientists.

The grey light is growing brighter, and the flicking signal on the car roof grows dimmer. Everywhere the windows are open, a war-born precaution intended to save the glass when impact tries to blow it out.

Impact of what? They just don't understand. They can't because they can't think without relating everything to Man, which restricts all thought and makes it worthless.

They should know that by now, with that scattering of dead men they can't explain. But they go on relating it to what they know, which is nothing.

That is why St. Cary is dead now.

The car is moving off . . .

The soft sound fades in the dawn, leaving me with the emptiness of nausea, which is fear.

The silence is appalling. Even the birds have gone. There is no sound in all the world but the idle flapping of the torn newsbill in the light morning wind.

I don't think It will come before evening. That is, fifteen hours of silence ahead of me, hours of emptiness and fear. I wish to God it would come now, striding out of the hill, a mighty giant wading down amongst the houses, trampling on towards the square . . .

But it won't be like that at all.

I went to the window and listened for the police car. There was no sound of it. I had to make sure before I went up to let the dog out of the stationery store. The dog I stole. When I let him out he was agitated. The silence had got him too.

He ran downstairs and out onto the empty street. I looked down through the window and saw him go into the alley beside the office. I knew he was alarmed, that he was going back to his home.

I'm scared he won't come back to me.

I promised I would write what led up to this. It took three days, that lead-up. Just three days, back to Tuesday. Is that possible? It must be. Three days back to Tuesday. Craike had to get a new electric typewriter after the battle on Tuesday . . .

I am the reporter on the *St. Cary Times*. The only reporter. I also act as book reviewer, sub-editor, and I also

act for the national newspapers until they think some story of mine is big, then they send down a name journalist. I do some broadcasting for the BBC, Plymouth and Western TV.

I came to St. Cary by accident ten years ago. Four of us were demobbed from the Army in Plymouth. In a fit of masochism I had signed on to see the world. After freedom three of us had to go to London. I had to go nowhere. We had a binge, and when we counted up there was enough for three fares to London and three bob over.

I got a three-shilling train ticket and got out when it ran out.

I said to the porter: "Where the hell's this?"

He said: "St. Cary."

I said: "Where the hell's that?"

He said: "I don't know, I live here."

I walked into town and thought it was dead, but then I had never seen a place like this is now. I put up at the Doniert—the King Doniert Hotel—thinking that before the bill came due next day I could get a job and an advance of pay or find the National Assistance Office.

My Army gratuity took almost a year before it turned up. In that year I had to prove I was ex-Sergeant John Newton no less than ten times. In the interests of economy the government spent thousands of pounds trying to prove I needn't be John Newton, ex-sergeant.

The next morning, ten years ago, was fine. I walked out of the Doniert, and next door I saw the offices I'm in now. I went into the shop downstairs where they sell stationery, newspapers and postcards of glorious Cornwall. I saw a lot of things Cornish—after all, I was twenty miles inside Cornwall—and that day's edition of the *St. Cary Times*—it was a Thursday—had a headline, "Kernow Demands Independence: A Plea by a Cornish MP."

Upstairs I found Editor Craike, long, scraggy, hawk-

faced, big-nosed, watching me suspiciously and scratching his back under his waistcoat, making his shirt come out.

"What do you know about anything?" he said.

"I knew a Cornish miner in Malaya just recently," I said.

"There are Cornish miners wherever there are mines," Craike said, leaning like a vulture, "which is anywhere but Cornwall."

The interview stuck. I went back to the Doniert where they had been waiting for me with a bill. I said I would stay for lunch, went back into the *Times* shop, bought a copy of Craike's paper and took it into the Green Park down by the river. I read it through. It was mad for Cornwall, mad for Kernow; cut off England! Britons forever!

So I went back to Craike.

"This is all cock," I said.

"Oh," he said, scratching his back.

"You can't fight the English with a circulation like this," I said. "You want to get a cosmopolitan touch. Get in amongst them like that."

"Good morning," he said.

"You've got the answer," I said. "Cornish miners. All over the world. Adventurers. Explorers. Tell the stories. Let everybody know what Kernow has done for the world . . ."

He let me go on like that a long while.

Then he said: "You're a nut. Good morning."

Back in the Doniert I had a drink on the bill and was at the bar when Craike came in, carrying his jacket over his arm. It was a hot day like now.

"You work that idea out, kick it around. I'll pay ten guineas."

At that time I had no clue to what he meant by kicking it around. As far as I could see, I'd already given him

the idea, and I could see nothing to work out. I said so. He said what he meant at such length he actually worked the whole thing out himself.

"Just get that on paper," he said.

"Can I use your office?" I said.

"No!" He shouted it so that everybody in the bar looked round. As he went out he said: "Come in at two."

I went in at two that day, and I've been here since.

Last Tuesday seemed, at the start, like every other Tuesday in ten years, give or take unimportant details. The *Times* comes out on Wednesday. Craike always used to get himself into a state of screaming nerves in case he should fall dead and the paper not come out. On Tuesday he sacked me, usually around noon.

"Take the bag!" he would shout, showering manuscripts and clippings in all directions. "I'll send your cheque!"

That meant I went down to the Doniert and had a drink until he rang up and told me to go and see somebody about something. He once said sacking me helped his nerves. Like banging himself on the head to stop a headache.

This Tuesday he gave me the bag earlier. At eleven, or roundabout. The two young girls and office boy were scurrying to and fro while Craike shouted. He couldn't find his phone, which he'd shut in a desk drawer. When I found it for him by tracing the line he sacked me on the spot, because pulling the phone out he knocked his eleven-o'clock tea over a whole clip of proofs just in from the ink shop down the road.

Old Jenkins, who comes in to proofread, was mouthing away in distress over a four-line jump in a proof a mile long. He asked me. It took ten minutes to realise that to get the drift you had to read every fourth line, shove all those at the top and then close up all the way down. Jenkins worries like hell about things. It stops him thinking. Poor old chap. I wonder where he went to when they

evacuated? He hadn't got anybody but a grave he kept planted and trimmed by the side of the church.

Leila, our secretary, who sits near the door with glass screens around, called me over about a phone message from a London agency.

"It's about your Uncle Camm," she said.

Leila is very beautiful and has eyes as blue as Dosmary Pool. Craike's description. Dosmary is the pond where Arthur threw Excalibur, they say, up on Bodmin Moor.

"What about Uncle Camm?" I said.

"They think you might have news about what he's doing. Would you ring them back?"

"No," I said, and sat on her desk. "Why should they suddenly ring about Camm? There hasn't been an enquiry in all five years he's been up in the valley."

"But he is famous. You know—or was—still is—you know what I mean."

"If there was anything Camm wanted puffed," I said, "he would have told me."

"Well, there it is," she said, and went on typing. Leila does the heartsease column and solves everybody's problems but her own.

When I moved off Craike shouted: "Johnny! Johnny! Phone!"

It was the *London Standard*.

"What's this about Camm? Something new down there?"

Obviously there was a buzz running in the big city, but I had heard nothing of it. In fact, for years the only people who had been at me about Camm was a magazine that had wanted an article about his retirement.

"What do *you* know?" I said. It is always best to sound as if you know more than they do, though I don't know why people should spill what they think you already know.

"Light bending," they said.

I wondered what on earth light bending was. It re-

mind me of an interview I had overheard between a journalist and Camm. Asked the purpose of a new ship radar development, Camm had said, "Its effect is to stop fog screaming." Camm was a deadpan joker.

"I'll see what goes on." After I rang off I phoned Camm. "I'm getting a lot of London calls. They think you're up to something."

There was a dead silence. I felt a sudden alarm, for I knew Camm very, very well.

"I see," he said.

He had used that pause for quick thinking. I always knew. There was a trace of tension in his voice when he went on.

"Come up this evening." He cut off.

Jenkins sucked his teeth at my elbow, craning over a galley.

"Is it right—phantasmagoria with an 'f'?" he said.

We had to look it up, because of fantasy.

"You heard Councillor Brant died?" he said, pencilling. "Died in Haver's shop, half past nine this morning. Fell down dead. It only just came to mind."

Ever since his wife died Jenkins doesn't much care who else dies. Death is a thing I think he is rather impatient for. At times I've thought he could do it himself but for that old dog of his. He never went to church again after that fool vicar told him dogs didn't go to heaven. Some people are bloody fools. Some are just bloody.

I wonder what is the picture of the hereafter we carry, if we carry one? Jenkins will have old Martha sitting by the fire with her cat and dog, not saying anything but just being happy with him there. It's so simple like that. But think back on all the people you knew, all the people you thought you loved and didn't after all. Are we going to make excuses and pretend for ever more?

I didn't like my mother. I know that now. She died when I was small, motored to death, but even when I was so small I had that uneasy instinct that she wasn't inter-

ested in me much at all. That when she looked at me with that faraway look, she was thinking of something a long way past me.

My father was master of a tanker. When home, which wasn't often, he talked to me as he would to some buddy he'd picked up in a Singapore bar. I didn't understand half he talked about. He went overboard off Sydney when I was eleven. I heard somebody whisper the sharks had been drunk for months. I thought it must be a bon mot and repeated it at school.

Will Father and Mother be there? She looking through me to something she always wanted much more? He roaring with his friends in some eternal bar? Will they both be drifting on their different seas to nowhere? Will I? Or did I ever make up my mind to go anywhere? Most places I went to I found I didn't really want to be in.

Till I came to St. Cary and it clicked. After a while—two years, it was—Camm retired and I got him the farmhouse up in the valley.

Camm took me over when Father died. He sent me to school and Cambridge. He hoped I would read physics, but I can't hold maths and I don't believe in logical reasons for anything. So I read history and got the lowest pass since Churchill. My tutor said my B.A. meant Below Average.

National Service took me into the Army for two years. I signed on for longer as a five-year hair shirt. I have a thing about kicking myself when I'm down.

Like now. Waiting for the Jabberwock with eyes of flame.

The newsbill keeps flapping. I keep feeling I'll go down and tear it out of the wire frame, but I'm afraid to.

The bloody dog hasn't come back. The sun's coming up over the south slope of the hill. It's a beautiful morning even here, like this.

Chief Constable Fatty Barker rang up, testing the phone lines, all hot now, direct to headquarters, twenty miles on. That was at six-fifteen.

I can hear things now I never heard in ten years. A sort of creaking of the wood in the building, like breathing, moving with the day warming up. My chair grunting when I move. The breeze riffling leaves on the pull-off calender by the window. The flapping of the newsbill out there.

I wish that damn dog would come back.

That hot Tuesday, three days ago, I spent an hour before lunch gathering up items for next week's *Times*. St. Cary is a place where people get born, get on, go wrong, get married, give birth, steal, prosper, fail and fornicate, and that is what the *Times* is all about. Craike throws everything about fornicating into the basket, purely on the grounds we don't carry ads for fornicators. So far as we know.

Having the bag at the time, I used the phone down in the shop to gather in the town news and chat while Mrs. Barnes, who runs our shop, rattled gossip into my other ear.

"Mrs. Pensilva's back," said Mrs. Barnes.

Mrs. Pensilva owns the paper, but till then I had never seen her. She lives mostly in London, the Bahamas, New York and Moscow. She fits anywhere. We know when she's back in residence for a while, for Craike puts on a smart suit, big buttonhole and a black Homburg. Then he gets into his little Ford, and the roof pushes his hat down over his big nose, and he looks like a captive bush baby. Then he goes up to the house, and they talk policy or finance. When he comes back he threatens to blow the Tamar Bridge and throw the English out of Cornwall. He doesn't call that civil war, but a war between nations.

"He'll be out this afternoon then, for sure," I said.

"Surely will," said Mrs. Barnes. "Though he always

comes back that vexed. Oh, and Mrs. Jelly had a baby last night."

"What? She fifty and a grandmother!"

"Yes."

"Give me the phone again. I'll get the nationals with that." I get paid for what the nationals use of mine. That's really how I live and have some beer as well. Craike pays the beer.

A few sketch pictures of St. Cary life were coming together, but I did not like the idea of the dead councillor's obituary. He had been living with Grace Farr for thirty years while his wife continued to live in the adjoining house. That's news, perhaps, but not my kind.

There was another threat of railway closure, a reproposal of a new road bridge; both these are twenty-year veterans, ghosts that appear regularly and vanish again, pursued by lack of funds. One day Cornwall will choke itself with traffic. The long boot will overspill back onto England, bubbling blue smoke.

The chairman of the Women's Club came into the shop while I was jotting. She gushed and asked me to get Camm to talk to them at the next meeting.

"I'm sorry, he's very busy and a misogynist."

I could see she was trying to work out whether he was a sectarian or collected matchbox tops. She was down on quiz-programme material.

"It's nice of you to think of him," I said.

"As a matter of fact, his name cropped up this morning. On the phone, you know. I forget who . . ." She rattled on awhile.

Camm was certainly rising in the news that day. It was very unusual. Camm uses publicity as Man uses an animal; either he works it till it dies or he neglects it utterly. If he has finished something, he puffs. If he hasn't, he says nothing. He has always been like that, and I have known him all my life.

What I didn't understand was why he hadn't said anything to me, because I'm the dog he tries it on. It gives him good practice at explaining, for if he can make me understand it, then there's nobody who won't.

I was wrong about Craike and Mrs. Pensilva, the imaginary *grande dame* with the Edwardian splendours we had built up in the office.

I was wrong about everything that Tuesday, because I was trying, mentally, to force that Tuesday to be an ordinary Tuesday, and everything about it was deliberately different.

The dog's back. I almost cried when I heard his big feet pattering up the stairs from the street. He came in, waving his big white flag of a tail, laughing with his blue spotted face. He didn't seem to care his master had gone.

It shows you what counts with people. Manston is the bookie next door, with everything that goes with it, the goldest watch, the largest cigars, the longest Jag and this English setter. He carries the pedigree everywhere. "Look at that," he says, "Bench Champ, Bench Champ, Field Champ, Cruft's Champ, Irish Field Champ, Cruft's Champ—" He ticks off the forebears of this dog with the end of his cigar.

Yet he went off in the night and didn't even notice I'd stolen the dog. Perhaps he thinks it's all right just to hang on to the pedigree. "I had this beautiful dog once; look, Bench Champ, Field Champ—" Yes, perhaps that would be good enough for him.

Jason stands there, resting his chin on the arm of my chair, looking up at me with big dark eyes, alight with mischief, his tail wagging his rear end.

I know what he wants, but I don't want to go out.

When the phone went just then it gave me a shock like being punched under the heart. It's a damn clamour in this silence.

It was Chief Constable Fatty Barker again. Am I all

right? Well, I'm answering, aren't I? What's the matter with you? If I can still talk I'm still here, I think.

"And don't get yourself guilty for me," I shouted at him. "This is an arrangement with the State. The fact that you're the only one of the whole basketful of brass who knows me doesn't make you the executioner."

It was an unlucky way to put it, because I could almost feel his emotion oozing along the line. He's too sentimental to be a policeman, especially a top one. When they say brass, they mean brass, hard and bright and polished with lesser people's skins.

When I rang off, the silence hit me. I was suddenly half-smothered in the silent loneliness.

"Jason! Jason! Come here!"

He came prancing in at the door again and came up to the arm of my chair. I had a panicked feeling I ought to tie him to it so he wouldn't get away.

The panic sessions came and went in waves. The best thing was to get on typing, bringing back the familiar, so that I'd hear people again and not just the quiet, maddening flapping of the torn newsbill.

II

The damn phone rang and nearly blew me off my chair. "Are you all right?" Barker said.

What in hell's name do they ask questions like that for? Of course I'm not all right. I'm waiting to be eaten, burst, swallowed whole, shattered, dissolved. I said so. Fatty Barker said the Prime Minister wanted to know. I told him the PM was really a boiled pudding with a couple of raisins for eyes and the brain of a one-speed tape.

I could hear Barker was worried by that, thinking I was cracking up too soon, perhaps, so I told him everything was quiet.

He rang off, and I took the dog downstairs and into the open, deserted King Doniert, where I'd met Craike on Tuesday morning.

It was 1 P.M. Tuesday, earlier than Craike usually came in, and he looked distracted, as if the paper hadn't been put to bed yet.

"Mrs. Pensilva wants to see you," he said.

"What for?" I said.

"She's got a lot of prints and plans of the old mine workings. She'll lend them to you. Go about five. She'll give you sherry."

"That's pretty peculiar, isn't it? Why so sudden?"

He looked at me and shouted.

"I happened to mention you were interested!"

"Very kind of you," I said. "The way you bellow I'd think there was something guilty about it."

"Stupid English oaf!" he snarled, and turned to his beer.

"Flopovers," I said. This dated from when I had told him that the great Cornish invention of pasties was in fact an old Sussex concoction called a flopover.

"You're sacked. Clear out."

"You haven't taken me back, yet. Do I get a double golden handshake?"

"You're just a plain bloody English fool," he said, more slowly. "Have a drink." And he actually reached for money before he ordered. Usually it had to be got out of him with a gouge. It was an act. Then he crept round to another subject. "Your uncle. Camm. It's been suggested you might do an article about his work. What he's doing up there."

"Who suggested it?" I was very suspicious and uneasy. He snapped his bony fingers. "Can't call to mind."

"Mrs. Pensilva?" I asked.

He looked the other way and called the barmaid.

"Considerable local interest," he said. "Great man."

"Look, he's been working up there for five years. He doesn't want any articles. He doesn't want publicity, and he doesn't want women."

"Not women?" Craike said, jerking round.

"He's a misogynist."

"Is he? Well, that's a good line. Makes the women readers angry. A challenge to charm. Who was that film chap who came on television and said women were a bloody pest? They chased him worse than ever. One half asking what about his mother, and the other half just plain frustrated." He got our tankards refilled. "Is that really true about Camm?"

"Yes," I said.

He pushed my can to me.

"She wants to see you about five," he said.

He always worked his exercises right round to beginnings. If ever we had a conference in the office he would start, "Now I suggest this; what do you think?" Then we'd discuss and suggest and bang around the possibilities, and at the end he would say again, "Well, I suggest this; what do you think?"

I went back to the office Tuesday afternoon, about three. Secretary Leila said there was another call for me from a London paper, and I went to my desk to ring them back.

About ten past three, Leila's husband Tom, a man of six foot four and eighteen stone, came into the office. He took up a typewriter in two hands and dashed it to the ground. Then he picked up a phone, ripped the line out and threw the instrument out of a window, cord trailing kitewise. Then he kneed over a couple of small desks, showering a lot of paper to the floor. Then he picked up Who's Who and threw it at me but missed. Then he shoved another typewriter off a desk, shouted "Bastards!" and rushed out in a frenzy.

While the papers were still settling after the storm, Craike got to his feet.

"Get the insurance company!" he said, firmly.

Leila ran off to the girls' room, holding a handkerchief to her nose.

I should have done something, but I sat where I was, the phone to my ear, just staring. Of the two young girls one said, "Oh no!" and the other said, "Christ"; both backed out of the way. The office boy threw an empty teacup at the door after the assailant had gone out.

London came through and said: "Can you get us what Camm is up to? We have a whisper it's very big. He's your uncle, isn't he?"

"What whisper did you get?"

"It just came in to the gossip table. Some dinner last night. One of the guinea-a-whisper boys phoned it in."

"I'm seeing him tonight, but I don't promise anything."

I went out just now because the dog started pricking his big blue ears up and stretching his nose at the stairs. I fairly ran, to think someone was still about, someone had been overlooked. We tore down the stairs together. When we got into the street the only thing moving was the dog's tongue and the bill, flapping idly. The breeze was dying down.

Back upstairs I suddenly wondered whether to send the dog away. It isn't fair he shares what's coming. But where the hell can he go now? I'm a deadbeat coward. History repeats itself. When I was five and ran away from home I took the dog with me; a Sealyham it was. We got about a mile and it started to rain, and we cowarded all the way back. Then we hid in the cupboard under the stairs just to frighten the daylights out of them all.

All. Mother and Uncle Camm. He was there.

I remember cuddling there together with the dog, terrified we would be found, then desperately hoping we would, then waking up in bed next morning. Mother had gone on about it, how it had worried her, how she had felt, what she had done to find me, and it made me a criminal, so I said I'd gone to find the dog. He was the naughty one. Uncle Camm gave me half a crown.

"Don't run off to America with it," he said.

Leila didn't come back that Tuesday afternoon. The office youngsters straightened things up, the telephone people came, and Craike was forced at last to get a couple of new typewriters. The others were so old they spelt Chaucerian.

It upset me, that fracas, because it was to do with me, originally. When Leila came, three years ago, we'd

shared a mutual fall. It's often a mistake to think of the gold, peach-and-cream type as being cold. Came a time when I wanted her for good, and I remember I was shaken right back when she said no. Then Tom came along and she really fell for him, but she made the fatal mistake.

She told him. She ignored the first rule she always gave in Clara Canely's Column—"Your past is yours."

Craike came over to use my phone and call the insurance. Anybody else would have called the police, but he had a heart of sponge, sprayed to look like granite.

"He'll break up that marriage next," he said, after the call. "Why in hell did she marry him?"

Leila was two people, and she liked two sorts of love. Love for fun and love for serious, the second being that kind of mix-up between passion and mother-wish. I hadn't given her any motherly instincts. Tom had. But it was himself he offered as the child in need.

"Don't forget Peggy P.," Craike said, unsitting from my desk. "Five o'clock."

The office boy came round with cups of tea.

"That was good, wannit?" he said, putting my cup down. "Bam! Zowie! Pow! Arrrgh!" He shadow-boxed for a moment. "Wish it was every afternoon."

The girls were picking up papers and bits of typewriters. Craike got some old bills and began to splash out tomorrow's headlines with his felt pen on the backs.

The last one he did, on Wednesday night, didn't have an edition of the paper to back it up. It was news all by itself.

It's flapping out there now.

I go on writing. It's the only way to wait. Sometimes I wonder if anybody will come here and read it. But it doesn't matter. It's for me. Me and the dog. Jason, Bellman of Boisdale, Blue Belton—

He's lying there now with his face on his paws, look-

ing up at me. When I look at him he swings his tail in an arc across the floor. He doesn't care about champs. He cares about fields and birds and grass and trees and the sun and the rain and snow and the wind. He cares about people. Dog. The only animal that ever sought the company of man, and suffered just as much as all the rest who didn't.

I remember Camm that hot day when the vicar, the Reverend Charles Jolly, came in and started talking about the hereafter, and heaven.

"Heaven?" Uncle Camm bellowed. "Do you really think some idiot God has set aside a reward for Man, that wretched savage who tortured and prostituted and slaughtered the rest of His creatures? What kind of a God do you think He is, then? The trouble is, you fat idiots think God's a man and will be on Man's side. Just stop and think he might be a bull or a horse. Then you'll really start to fear God. Then you'll really start to pray!"

At five on Tuesday it was blazing hot. When I drove up outside the Pensilva house I had on just a shirt and slacks. Even my linen jacket seemed too hot and heavy when I put it on.

The house is Edwardian, red brick, lots of white windows, verandahs, balconies and an atmosphere of airy comfort that has wealth to back it up. I'd passed it many times but seen no more than a gardener working, and sometimes an expensive car or two in the drive.

A woman in a flowered overall showed me into a conservatory full of fine, late flowers, with wicker chairs and a table set out with sherry, scotch, gin and an assortment of additives, lemon, ice, soda, tonics, dry ginger, a box of cigarettes and cigars. Ostentatious.

Waiting for this aged lady, in her creaking, side-button boots and lace-up stays, I stared out of the open doorway down the slopes of the lawns. It looked over the bottom of the mining valley. Towards the east there was the lit-

tle pile of Liskeard, up on a soft hill, looking no bigger than a village, and beyond that, by five miles, the sea sparkled. I wondered why the sea always seems to climb up to the sky when you look at it from shore.

She came in quietly and spoke my name behind me.

There's no point in trying to put down what she was like. I can't sort it out in my own mind. I could say reddish-brown hair, brown eyes, big, loose mouth, splendid figure; these make a cardboard figure, meaning nothing. Add vivacious, charming, mischievous; still nothing. I was bewitched from the moment I saw her. She was a witch. The most beautiful witch I have ever seen. I wanted her from that moment. I lusted for her, hated her, was exhilarated, desiring and fearful. What is she? Thirty, thirty-five? I don't know. With her it doesn't matter. At sixty there will be the same magic, the same compulsion. She is Eve the Siren, Eve the Lover, Delilah the Betrayer. She has it all.

She chatted with gay impudence and malicious wit, but she had a light gift of bringing a person suddenly to life with a few words. She told me the story of the family from 1750, through the rich mining days to now. It seemed to take no time at all, and the men and women who had gone before her were all brought alive to me with casual artistry.

"Tell me about yourself," she said at one time. "Your family. Why did you come here? Camm is your uncle, isn't he?"

"Not in fact. A childhood gain."

"Really?" The big brown eyes looked askance. "Yet there is such a likeness. Both such big men too, but he's thinner now. Most distinctive looking. Strange we have never met. He's been my tenant for five years, but somehow it just hasn't happened." She laughed.

I think it was the velvet laugh that turned away my sudden rising of suspicion at Camm's coming up in the chat.

"I should like to meet him," she said. "Perhaps I will now I've met you. Does he work up there? Some wretched man from the Council was here asking questions about it. Something to do with the rates. He spoke almost as if there was some kind of factory up there."

"Camm has his hobby," I said.

She was watchful, amused, as if she knew better but wanted to kid me on. As if she knew she could kid me on, and knew I'd go on. And I knew it too, which made me angry with her and myself. It gave me an intense frustration, wanting to resist mentally, and being swayed by emotion against myself.

She is a wonderful woman. She is a bitch. I love her. I could knock her down to save morality. Whichever way my twisted soul might go I know I'd lose. Which might drive me mad, but there is something madder to wait for now.

I don't want to think about her anyway. She just has to go in. She is part of the three days to now.

Before I went she said: "Come to supper. I want you to think about a book for me. About my family."

I said: "I don't write books. I don't write. I'm a reporter."

She made me think of Camm.

Camm, to me, was always taller than he really was. Perhaps the childhood image of him towering above me stayed after. He seemed lanky too, but he was big. It was a weird, loose double-jointed action that he had which made him see gangly. Seeing him striding on the moors was like watching a man spider, covering ground at a wild rate. He had a Rolls U.I. gave him as a parting gift. He drove it through almost inaccessible tracks in the moor, to prehistoric villages, the tracks of forgotten railways, riverheads, mine sites, anywhere. Then he would get out of it and walk. Sometime, next day, the day after, he'd ring me to take him out to get it. It always took a

long time. He'd get me to stop by granite blocks in the ground and talk about strata, metallic deposits, alluvial tin, copper lodes; by ancient rings of stones, Celtic cusses, burrows, and talk of ancient rites, the lore, witchcraft and the dawn of religion. He'd point to a car and say where the design was out of balance, and how simply one could right it. He'd just look over the great rolling moors and talk of strange people, funny people, great people, small people, animal habits, clouds, astronomy, language formations, bird migrations. The lot. He was always greedy for knowledge, and he could give it away, put it over, make it live.

It was when he got on to his technical stuff—which wasn't often—that he just walked right away from me. I couldn't catch up. As I grew older I didn't even try.

He was desperately shy of women. When women came near he'd mutter and lope away, with his big, stick-out ears going red. Yet he could stand up and lecture five hundred of them with an ease and charm that made them chase him after, when he couldn't say a word but "Get me out of here, Johnny: Can't stand bloody women!" He was probably the topmost of all electronic pioneers and called himself a transistorised tinker. But when he got angry sometimes he'd say, "What the hell do they think I am? A bloody radio peddler?"

Once in his mighty walks over the moors he came to a pub and sat in the bar, drinking beer. He found one of the men had been a shepherd for fifty years. His enthusiasm burst out. "Tell me about sheep," he said. "Sheep?" said the shepherd: "What's there about sheep, then?" So Camm told him. "Well, in all my life I never knowed that, but now I comes to think, 'tis true. You mun be a sheep man yerself, then." Another time I remember a barful of countrymen listening rapt to Camm's observations on the equation E equals MC squared. Nobody understood a word—couldn't have done—but it made wonderful listening. He was a Hans Merlin Andersen.

But at other times you wouldn't get a word out of him. He'd bark your head off if you tried.

His reading was indescribable. I have seen his bed in the morning where he had fallen asleep, a fan of books open and face down on the quilt to keep the places. There was history, an SF thriller, the Bible, a railway survey 1843, *Tom Jones*, and Agatha Christie, a French edition of *Gargantua* and a book of Latin verbs. He had read bits of all these before he had gone to sleep. He remembered which bits the next morning.

Sometimes he ate great meals, sometimes he ate very fine meals, sometimes he didn't eat at all but drank vast quantities of tea. He gave this up when he started belching, and went back to eating and drinking beer. He loved animals but wouldn't have a dog because he couldn't face the thought of it dying on him.

During the war he insisted on flying with bomber crews to test his own navigational equipment. On one of these he was shot down. He was captured by the Germans, who put him in a luxury flat and spent months buttering him up in the hope he would agree to work for them. He accepted all they gave and gave nothing in return but what he called "a Mona Lisical smile which obviously made them think I might change my mind, given time."

When I got him the farm he got all the removal men drunk, and when I stumbled in on the occasion I found him demonstrating Irish jigs, giving some brief history of folk and other dancing with what breath he had left. "There is more of Man's secret self in these old dances than in any books he ever invented." They all cheered this observation and sang "Nellie Dean." By morning as they snored around him, he played some Chopin at the piano. He was an awful player because he could never actually remember how the theme went, but he improvised quite tunefully. He said he learnt to play as it gave him the excuse to wave his elegant hands like swans. If he

did it doing anything else, he said, everybody would call him a queer.

He went round the St. Caryl tradesmen, gave each a hundred pounds in advance for goods, and instructions to let him know when it ran out. He hated debt. But when one grocer didn't tell him and finally sent a bill for two hundred, Camm rang and said, "You must be off your head. I'm not to be trusted!" He never gave to charity without having the beggar explain exactly what it was for and what their organisation was, and by the time he'd put them right he almost got a sub from them as well.

Invited to speak at a dinner following the Prime Minister he began: "If you take a tube and from it extract the air, you have Fanny Adams. If by indescribable assiduity and incomparable misdirection of industry you further extract the vacuum from the tube, you will have achieved, like the Right Honourable gentleman before me, Sweet Fanny Adams."

Once appointed to a special committee for probing a considerable malaise in industry and national finance he said: "I have studied the facts with great attention and have come to the inescapable conclusion that this whole matter is solvable at once and without further expense."

"How?" they said.

"Make the workmen do some work," Camm said, and walked out.

He himself worked so hard and long that there were times when he was almost ill with exhaustion. And when that happened it was out with the car, out onto the unknown moor and walk and walk and walk until some small pub appeared, and there he would stop, take beer and cheese and talk and joke and sing, and quite often, fall asleep there.

The first strange equations which gave him the start to his leapfrogging wave lengths were written in ball point on the wallpaper of his bedroom at the Wild Deer, near Tintagel, where he woke in the middle of the night and

had no paper with him. It's still there. They put a frame and glass over it. Having written it down he didn't need it any more. It was in his head.

As a boy he took me everywhere, model exhibitions, the Science Museum, concerts, films, boxing, football, cricket, even church. He used to sit in church with his arms folded, always frowning. When the collection came, if it was an open plate, he put a penny in. If it was a bag, he put a note in. Often after the service he would stay and discuss theological aspects with a vicar who was obviously itching to get back and see some Western on the telly.

Camm, to a boy, was a magician. He could take you anywhere with words and a splendid imagination. You could drift amongst the stars with him and see all the colours in a black and dusty void. He made things come to life with a sudden twist of phrase, an unexpected laugh. My father, who had travelled the world regularly, had seemed to see in it the flies, filth, diseased beggars, unbreathable heat, shivering cold and the humour of the first long bar in Hong Kong. He just didn't know anything about children. He was embarrassed by them. He just had never been able to think of what to say to them. He brought me back presents from the Orient: Japanese geisha dolls from some elegant brothel and books on geography and navigation in seventeen languages. Then in despair at my stunned appreciation he would release his tensions with a stiff glass of Holland gin. It used to upset me because he tried so hard. He looked even pathetic searching his head for something to say to me. It made the comparison between himself and Camm so appalling I used to cry about it in the night.

Then Mother was killed and Father drowned, and that left only Camm. I felt terrible guilt spasms when people were sorry for me, poor orphan.

But the great expanding world of colour and magic which I began to think of with Camm didn't come off.

Instead he bundled me off to school, just as usual. Nothing changed. Except that during the holidays, Camm was at home sometimes.

He had a housekeeper called Cleevey, a fine woman of whom I was suspicious and jealous. I thought she meant to snare Camm somehow or the other. Then I found she had a husband away in a mental home, and felt ashamed for weeks, waking in the night, all hot with it.

When I first fell into St. Cery, Camm was upcountry in charge of U.I. research. He came down to stay at my cottage sometimes for a weekend, sometimes for a week. That was when he began to stride the moors, chat with the inn patrons, gather up the local legends in which Cornwall abounds.

He used to explore the adits in disused mines, and I'd lose him sometimes for a night and a day before he turned up again. His explorations became more enthusiastic. He seemed at one time to spend more days down on the moor than with U.I. When he walked he took a satchel slung over his shoulder. I suspect it was a lady's leather handbag. In this he took torch, compasses, cord, very big scale maps and sandwiches. It was nothing then for me to come home late, starving for a slice of cold meat, to find he'd taken it all out on some lone expedition.

As I look back now to those days a few years ago, I remember things which had no importance then but mean a hell of a lot now. He brought home stories of the old pixies, the ghost of Dunnar Bridge, the yelling cave near Cheesewring and the haunting of the Wheal Silva Mine. Even he had forgotten this, for he remembered it later and couldn't recall the details. It is very odd how a man can have a brain that can carry whole libraries of details about his work, yet can shed even simple things he should remember. But then again, that was Camm, just another facet that made him.

Around this time he began to talk of getting out of U.I., of retiring from the political pressures that were constantly interfering with his work.

"Whenever you discover something," he grumbled, "some political-military sod wants to know if you can kill somebody with it. If not can you paralyse them, or spy on 'em. It's got beyond reason."

"Where are you going to go?" I said.

"Down here," he said. "I see the farm up the mining valley is to let."

"It's big."

"I could do with a bit of space. I want to work."

"I thought you said retire."

"Retire from the cannibals, not from work."

"You think it might be suitable?"

"There is a very odd radio property about that area. I've taken testing equipment up there in the car. It's almost as if there's a natural carrier beam up there, going directly up. It increases the range of my equipment. I can't explain why. Could be something to do with the granite. You know it has heavy radioactive properties, to put it simply."

"Couldn't be a shade off the TV mast on the far hill?"

He laughed. "Nothing so crude, man. This is a way-out frequency I'm talking about, and it matches my new equipment. That's the whole thing. See if you can get the farm."

"What will you pay?"

"Anything. I just want it."

That was the real beginning of all this. The finding of that carrier wave he couldn't understand. That and the odd tales of the hauntings and the pixies. It was all there, but he didn't see it then. When he did see it, it was too late. Yet even when I say that, I'm not so sure he really saw it. He was trying to. We both tried to. But we just hadn't got the bloody brains.

I got him the farm five years ago through agent Nancollas, who handled it for Mrs. Pensilva, the owner of the lands round there. That fixed it.

I came to St. Cary by accident. There are a lot of accidents. But when you look back after a long time, it seems "accidents" doesn't fit. The farther you look back, the more life seems to form a pattern. It's the old query, "Did I fall or was I pushed?" We often ask that. But if pushed, Who?

Peggy Pensilva's persistent but sly probing into Camm brought everything of him back to me in that house of hers. The more she talked, the more she asked offhanded questions, the more I wanted to tell, and the closer I clammed up. I did not trust her, because I couldn't see what she was getting at, or why she wanted to get at it. All the time we talked she drank, and the more she took down, the more eager she was to know about Camm and to know him.

Then she changed right round and set on me, wanting to know everything, gaily appreciative of every stupid thing I said.

At some time then, and I agreed to go back there after supper. After I'd seen Camm.

The dog looked up suddenly then, and I sopped writing and listened, my heart beating very slowly. Outside the bill flapped lazily, but I couldn't hear anything else.

Why do the birds go, when everybody else goes? Are they frightened of sudden silence?

But the dog was right, for the phone went a good half minute after he looked up. How do they know? I remember dogs at home when I was small going to the door and lying there, waiting, and afterwards Father would turn up in a taxi from a long sea trip. I never got back from school—and lord knows what a hanger-abouter I was—but the dog wasn't waiting behind the door for me.

What is it they have? Camm says it's intelligence we don't understand.

Chief Constable Barker calling again.

"Radar on Hessary Tor has some kind of echo from the hill. Do you know anything?"

"You didn't listen to Camm," I said. "When it comes, he said, radio will be jammed. It'll just die out. That's what he says the signal will be—no signals at all."

"Yes, but there is something."

"What about the television watch up there? The robot cameras?"

"They blew out."

I breathed for a bit.

"I thought they might."

"Are you all right?" he said. "We keep getting report demands from London."

"They'll get them when anything happens. There's nothing here."

"All right."

"And look, don't keep ringing. You don't know what it's like in this quiet. It makes you jump like hell."

"Can't you muffle the bell?"

"You just don't understand, do you?" I slammed down on him.

That Tuesday evening Camm's old Anne farmhouse shed long shadows across the lawns. Camm keeps the lawns smart by letting the moor sheep in. They do a better job than a mower. Beyond the house is a great stone barn, the place he had converted for his work. A kind of massive laboratory. To me a place of terror, horror and disastrous imagination.

I rang the bells at the house, and they jangled and brought nothing. I pressed the buzzer at the barn, and nothing happened. So I stood in the middle of the lawn and shouted, "Camm! Camm! I'm here!" And nothing happened.

The air was still. One could hear for a hundred miles. I looked down the valley. The farmhouse is not far from the top. Below it the valley widens out into a floor that runs on down to where the embankment and bridge of the old railway tracks snake across it. Seven miles beyond there are more hills and the sea shows between. On the left the great hill rises in a godlike mound, half the year crowned in cloud. To the right the slope of the valley breaks over into the rolling moor. The slopes of the valleys are scattered with the ruins of the old mine buildings; the great engine houses, sentinel boxes of granite that gleam gold in the sun, their eyeless window staring out, giving them faces, like sentinel giants in a story-book. Standing alone, old chimneys rear up, Lot's wives of granite, petrified in some final disaster. The great expanse of the forgotten industry is softened by sheep-hewn grass and the blazing golden glory of the gorse, spilling on the hill. It seems to bloom whenever it is summer, and they say kissing is in order when the gorse is in flower. It is a great, swelling valley of forgotten temples; the temples of the engines that once reared and plunged and fought the surging waters from the men below. They came in the copper rush of Victorian times and ended as suddenly before Victoria had gone.

I saw Camm on the hill slope by the great engine house of the Wheal Silva shaft, once the richest of all the mines in the area. When I saw him I felt a sudden dread. I remember it sharply now, though I don't know why I felt it then, when I knew nothing of what was going on.

I went down the stony track to him. He began walking towards me, a big gangling match insect, quick, impatient. He stuffed his pipe into his jacket pocket when we met.

"Where did you go?" he said.

"I didn't know it was urgent. I had to see your neighbour—landlord."

"That damned woman!" He looked alarmed. "Why? What did she want?"

"She was keen to know all about you, in fact."

"Why?" He struck his head out to me. "Why, after five years?"

"The sudden itch. Who can explain it? What on earth's the matter?"

"What is she after?"

"I don't know. She only came back from town today. She asked Craike to send me up. She wants a book done on her family."

"Did that strike you as a truth?"

"No. But it fills in between wanting to know about you. She wants to meet you."

"To hell with her!" he said, and turned his back on me to stare down the valley to the Wheal Silva shaft he had left.

"For God's sake, what's the matter?" I said. "Has something gone wrong?"

He brought his pipe out of his pocket again and lit it. He puffed like a locomotive for a while. Clouds of blue rose on the quiet air. Then he turned round.

"You didn't promise to introduce us?"

"I cut in the misogynist line and said you were always too busy."

"You said busy? You're a clot! Why tell her that?"

"What else could I tell her?"

He stared past me and spoke very slowly: "Why has she suddenly taken interest in what I'm doing?"

"Well, what *are* you doing?" I was getting impatient with him for this idiotic agitation. "Bluebeard stuff?"

He stuffed his pipe in his pocket again. "I'm very worried, Johnny." Then he stopped and just looked away past me again.

"What about? What's gone wrong?"

"Nothing yet. But why does she suddenly want to know?"

"Well, perhaps you were mentioned up in town and she suddenly realised how famous you are."

"Rubbish," he said. "There's a reason. There's always a reason when a woman starts to want to know something she shouldn't. She has had five years of occasional residence and never once wanted to see me. Now, all at once, she comes down. She wriggles. She goes through you. What do you think she has heard?"

"What is there for her to hear?"

"In five years that house has been empty every August and September. This year, suddenly, she comes back."

"Look, Camm. Whatever you've been doing you've been doing for years. I know that, and it's about all I do know. Why suddenly get boiled because you think you've been bugged?"

"Because something's happened," he said. "When I started this I saw a point of light to aim for. It was too small for me to see what it was then. I realise now I must have known all the time what would happen. It's possible even that the idea was planted in my head."

"By whom?"

"You'll learn. There is no identification yet."

I felt the cold creeps growing over me. This was not Camm; it was too tense, too agitated. He kept watching the broken road up the valley, then staring past me to the drive down to his house from the moor.

"Are you expecting somebody?" I said.

He looked back at me, sharply puzzled. Then suddenly he said it.

"There's something under here, something alive, four thousand feet down." He spoke almost in a whisper, hissing with the strain of saying those words.

"Under here? Four thousand? But the lowest workings were 295 fathoms. That's well under half the drop." The way he watched me got me prickly. "What do you mean? What sort of something alive?"

"Something tremendous," he said. "The very birth of

Mankind is under here, waking. The Man who was there before the beast developed—here, under us now!"

I just didn't understand it. At first I thought he'd happened on some kind of lost world, something preserved among the metallic strata laid down by some antediluvian uproar. They found the coelacanth alive and swimming a million years out of date. I thought he meant something like that. Like all the frightened men who came after, I hadn't got a mind big enough to realise anything beyond the beast. I don't know whether I quite do, even now.

"You mean you're frightened somebody will find out about it? But why keep it secret?"

"There could be extreme danger in a sudden, unprepared contact with it."

I brushed that off. I don't like extreme dangers when I'm sitting on top of them. "How did you find it? Have you been down there?"

"No. I'm going. I've put pumps down the shaft. The water's being cleared now."

"You mean it's flooded down there?"

"Of course. All the shafts are, have been for years."

"What is this Thing—a fish?"

"No, it's way below that. There's a crack in the rock going right down to some kind of vast cavern that gives no echo. A thin wall of rock divides the crevasse from the sump of the main Silva shaft. There's no water in the crack."

"If you haven't been down, how do you know this Thing's there?"

"I can hear it," he said.

I had a strong urge to get away from the vicinity of the shaft, as if something might come out of it. Some kind of Brontosaurus with champing jaws and eyes of flame. Childish.

"There's a hell of a lot to explain," Camm said. "Come up to the barn. I want to show you how it happened."

We started to walk along. I looked back down the

rocky track once or twice, just in case anything came up after us. The air I was catching off Camm was giving me nightmares out in the bright evening sun.

He stopped suddenly and pointed up to the line of the moor against the sky.

"Who's that?"

"For God's sake, Camm. It's somebody walking on the moor. What's the matter with you?"

"We don't want anyone down here now. No one at all. It's damned important. Probably the most important thing that has happened for the benefit of all Mankind and the rest of the animals. It's no good me trying to say why. It's something you'll get to know, to feel."

He walked on again, but I saw his head kept lifting to watch the man on the skyline until he had gone from sight. In the still air we heard him thinly whistling his dog, and that was all. Camm released his tension quite a bit then.

"You say you put pumps down the shaft?" I asked him. When he nodded, I said: "But it isn't yours. They didn't let the shaft."

"It's the only way down," he said, cutting me off.

"You mean to go down? But you say the contact would be dangerous!"

"Could be lethal. That is what we must test. I think I know the answer, but this discovery has presented so many facts, so many side effects, so many mental by-products, it's like trying to unravel a hair ball in your head."

We came to the barn. It was dead quiet all round, ominous, waiting.

Ships always look bigger inside than outside; so do barns. Camm's barn is huge. That night—Tuesday—the floor space was jostling with computers and electronic banks of lord knows what. There were lights and dials and slow-turning tapes in glass cases, and a central con-

trol desk like an organ console. The barn space is laid out like a church, with a central aisle and a cross space with the giant double doors on either end of it where once the hay wagons came in. There were a lot of dim operating lights near the machinery, but overhead the roof space was like the sky on a dark night. In that kind of electronic place I always wonder whether it will blow up while I am there.

Camu flicked a dozen switches on the console, then dragged a crate of beer out from beside it and gave me a goblet.

"Takes twenty minutes to warm up," he said. He was tense and hard.

He poured beer and sat on the crate, knees high, more like a match insect than ever.

He said: "It has always puzzled me why all Man's inventiveness has been towards creating senses which animals have naturally. Radio is the classic example. Smoke signals, tom-toms, semaphores, telegraphs and then radio and light. Radio brings to us what we know some animals have naturally. Dogs, birds, cats, for instance, all have navigational ability beyond anything our instruments can give us. Their communication is extraordinary. Without sound, without any machinery, they transmit thought to each other. We know it but can't understand how it's done.

"Migratory birds gather on the phone wires. Masses of them perch there and wait. More and more squadrons come down through the sky and perch with them. Still they don't go. Still they wait. More and more come. And then suddenly, they all go. What signals, what communications tell them when, then where? What brings a salmon back to a stream where he was born across five thousand miles of water? You can't answer.

"But, did *we* have these senses once? Did we lose them so that our primitive manual ingenuity was tied absolutely to trying to replace that loss by substituting ma-

chines? The only way to find out was to look back and see."

I was uncomfortable physically. I hate the prickly feeling of a lot of high-powered electricity around. I was uneasy. When Camm probed like that, things that seemed secure had their foundations dissolved. What he said then about looking back to the dawn of time put me further off shore.

"But how can you?" I hoped he couldn't. I was scared of the idea even then, before I'd seen anything.

"I've done it. I've looked back several thousand million years. I have seen incredible things, and you'll see them too. But I warn you, it's an overloaded emotional experience. It's like looking into your own brain. It fascinates and makes you sick with fear."

He explained simply what he had done. He had selected seventeen stars at an equal distance from Earth, and covering all planes. He had then bounced signals off the stars and received them back in the barn on seventeen receivers. These signals were then retransmitted from small uhf aerials in the vastest part of the barn and a picture recreated on sensitised air in the space in the middle of the aerial bombardment.

What it meant was that each star acted as a mirror reflecting light received from Earth. But the time taken for the light to reach these stars from Earth was several million years.

What I understand is this: that the picture reflected on each star is the picture of the Earth as it was several million years ago.

In the ordinary way, this picture would take the same number of years to come back here, so that we would never see it.

And this was the crunch. This was undoubtedly what the whisper was on about; the invention that would shake the daylights out of the commercial boys.

Camm said: "I had to get the picture from the stars of

a thousand nullion years back *now*. Light and radio travel at set speeds. Both are frequency pulses. Imagine the radio beam as an endless series of peas following each other along the beam at 180,000 miles per second.

"Imagine then that you can bounce from one of those peas, a separate signal, also travelling at 180,000 miles per sec. You have doubled the speed of light. Now bounce from the superspeed pea a third pulse, and multiplication begins. Repeat the process until the original speed is squared, cubed, magnified to whatever figure you need to achieve.

"What I wanted was to receive back here the reflection of the earth a thousand million years back, in a few minutes."

It seemed very simple, the way he said it. I think I have it right here, but I'm not sure of the figures. Figures pass me by. My brain automatically treats them like a fast ball and slices them on into limbo. I may be right about a thousand million, and the speed of light, but I wouldn't be sure.

What did penetrate my head then was what, in effect, Camm had done.

"It's a time shrinker," I said.

"This damn journalistic warp you have would spoil anything," he said.

My mind had been snatched. It was trying to cruise in 'some boys' magazine picture of space, watching beams bounce on some blazing star; imagining seventeen of them and the beams radiating out from our poor old Earth like the quills of a porcupine.

"And how the hell do you send everything from here? Don't you need the other side of the world as well?"

"Tangents, angles, reflections; it is the time and distance to each star that is the important factor. Angles can be adjusted to that. Also, as I told you once, there is some kind of carrier assistance in this place."

He went on to explain. It meant nothing at all to me.

Something started to buzz. He finished his beer and got up to attend to the calling machinery. The tension twisted up in me. I remember being once in the jungle twilight—what there is of it—standing still and knowing that a Chinese was behind me, with a gun. I knew it perfectly well, and I stood there for the longest moment. I turned out to be right. He relaxed and came on, changing his mind about killing to taking a prisoner. I turned a little quicker than he acted and sawed him in half with my gun.

But even now, as I remember, that tension is still there, as if he might still come back from the dead and win.

Those moments of standing there in the barn, almost backing away from the soft humming machines, seemed the same, almost worse. The electric atmosphere was getting into me like a high-speed dental drill. It was something more than ordinary suspense, ordinary fear.

It was what Camm had warned me of, but I didn't realise it then.

Then, up in the shadows of the great centre of the barn a glow began. A glow like a ball. A huge ball of vague gas, perhaps fifteen feet across. It was hard to judge.

A couple of times I've been to seances in the course of journalistic duty. I don't like them. They frighten me because while I'm there I'm never *sure*. Fear was muscle-locking in the darkness of the barn, watching a slow-turning globe of gas gain reality and colour from a million years ago.

Suddenly there was a complete globe up there, hanging in nothing, as solid as anything I have ever seen. When I say a globe, I'm wrong, for as it cleared and gained detail, it had a pear shape.

"Alchemy!" I remember shouting at him. "You're just a bloody lead changer!"

He ignored me and watched the frightful vision up there. "You're looking at the Earth as it was aeons ago.

This is the picture of the Earth the other stars saw long before the days of history."

I didn't say anything. There was a terror in me nothing physical could have created. It was like suddenly looking God in the face when you'd just said you didn't believe.

"It's a shock to start with," he went on, grinding words into me. "I got drunk after the first time. The damn thing seemed to be following me, long after I'd switched it off. It haunted me for days. As if I were personally responsible for the disaster."

I stared at the horrid thing, at the vast seas and the shapes of land I couldn't recognise. It wasn't the world, and yet it was familiar. The wrong-shape factor seemed like a straw for sanity to grab at.

"This is as the world was," Camm said, and quoted some awful figure. "Fifty times bigger in mass that it is now. You can see the shape of the American continent before it was wrenched from the African in the cataclysm. You can see the crack that finally tore down and parted when the whole face of the new world reassembled itself after the crash."

"I feel bad," I said, almost choking.

"Turn your back on it," he said.

"You shouldn't play about with this kind of thing, Camm!" I turned my back.

"You've got the feeling that this gigantic disaster is going to happen to *you*. You feel this *is* your world as well as the one you're standing on now. I know. I felt that. The brain isn't big enough, is it?" He was savage, fearful himself.

I turned back at last and looked again, but I could feel sweat icing on my face.

"What happened to that world? What happened?"

"It was the wrong shape. You can see that. The oscillation is too violent. When a drop of mercury falls into water it bursts into small balls. This earth was in the

process of doing that, shaping itself by centrifugal force. The top must have burst off, perhaps became the Moon. I can't say that, for I haven't tuned to such a period, and with my present crude instrumentation, I don't think I could."

"It's a blasphemy! It's a filthy thing! It never was like that. It's a distortion, an electronic mutation, a million-pound trick!"

I yelled, accused him, raged at him, and I ran out of the place into the night. The thing seemed to come after me, bounding and rolling in the black air behind, dragging me into its obscene disaster . . .

I had the feeling of being pursued again then, and the sweat broke out, and I just leant on the typewriter and was mad as a hatter, with nothing but a seething mass of bubbling fears in my brain. The dog kept standing against the chair and licking my face, and I kept shoving him away.

It was a long time before I could stop shaking, even in the heat of the office, and the sweat was on me like an ice skin.

And then the damn phone rang again and my heart seemed to come right up and make me sick.

"What's the matter now?" I shouted.

"We keep getting an echo from up on the hill," Barker said. "Are you sure there's nothing happening there?"

"Hang on."

I stood back from the desk and breathed deeply a few times to steady myself. The dog wagged his tail and looked glad at my recovery, and I patted his head. Then I got the naval glasses they'd given me and went and sat on the window sill. I trained the glasses over the roofs of the town to the greeny-brown mass of the hill. A couple of the old mine chimneys stood like sentinels against the sky.

Back at the phone I said, "I can't see anything. I'll go on the roof. Keep hanging on."

The dog came up with me onto the flat roof. He sniffed round but lost interest, mainly, I suppose, because no other dogs had ever been up there. I leant against a brick stack and trained the glasses on the hill. The old engine houses reared from the slopes like Inca palaces, gold in the sun. There was nothing moving. Everything had been taken, the sheep, the cattle, the ponies, all gone in the tramping, rattling livestock wagons early this morning.

There was nothing up there.

It increased my loneliness to the point of despair, and I just stayed there, leaning against the stack. The dog sat and watched me. The damn animal looked worried for me, and I think because of him, I pushed myself to move again and went down to the phone.

"There's nothing up on the hill," I said.

"Everything's all right, still?"

"No."

"What's happened?" He sounded alarmed. He sounded worse than I felt.

"I want some dog food."

"Dog food? What do you mean dog food?"

"A dog got left behind!" I shouted. "I want some food for him. I'm going to bust a shop in."

"There shouldn't be anything there," he said. "Can't you get rid of it?"

"What do you mean—get rid of it?" We were repeating like a couple of bad comedians.

"You've got that pistol."

I just stood there and stared at the wall.

"Yes, all right. I've got the pistol!" I bawled, and held the phone away from me. "Bang!" I did it as loud as I could and rang off, leaving him with earache.

We went down into the street. The flapping bill was

going very slowly now. The dog sniffed at it, then addressed it and came on well pleased. They say dogs leave their messages in urine. Men write with it. I put my foot through the glass door of Willans' store, and we went in and got some tins of dog food and a box of biscuits.

It gave me a queer thrill, a sense of sudden freedom, busting in the place like that. For a moment it was like being a boy again.

Perhaps I went back the years altogether, for boylike, I was suddenly scared they would come and take the dog away. When we came out of the shop I made him get behind me while I peered round the corner of the window, looking up and down the street. There was no soul to see, but when I straightened and walked out into the sun I went hot with th shame as if I had been seen by dozens.

I thought I was going off my nut, losing my hold on the present, but I argued it was the situation. Mentally, it was an untenable situation, and mentally I was healthy. It was the situation that was mad.

I stopped at the curb and looked up and down the street before crossing. Even the dog stopped ahead of me and looked back to see what was the matter.

Instead of going straight to the office I went into the Doniert. But once there I didn't have a drink, because I got the idea it might affect my brain more.

Then I heard the dog whining, and for a while I couldn't make out where he was. He was fussing at the door out to the toilets, pawing at it.

The idea that there might be somebody there made me scared. Again I felt my brain must be switching too fast for sanity. I ought to be pleased there might be somebody there, but instead I was frightened. As if I wanted to hold this lonely, crazy world all on our own, me and the dog.

Beyond the door there is a passage, with the men's door one side and the women's the other. Even then,

teaching forbade me looking in the women's. Anyhow it wasn't necessary.

The dog stayed in the passage, uneasy and tense. I went into the men's lavatory. There was a man in there, flat on the floor, and a revolver and a lot of mess all round on the tiles. I just went out again. It was nothing to do with me. The law had said, "Get out!" So he had got out. There is more than one way of doing almost anything.

We went out back into the empty bar, and this time I had a beer. I did think of going back into the office and ringing Fatty Barker, but there was nothing he could do now, and the whole thing seemed unimportant.

But from then I began to get the idea that the dog and I were not quite alone. It wasn't the feeling of some physical presence, but more the kind of thing you might feel in a haunted place. It wasn't the body in the lav that did it.

That thought made me drop the glass and run out, with the dog chasing hard behind, onto the pavement, into our building, up the stairs, into the office, grab the glasses, race on up the stairs, out through the last door onto the roof. I couldn't see through the glasses for mist and sweat, and must have dropped my handkerchief, so I pulled my shirt out to wipe them. I remember gasping in panic at not being able to see quickly enough. But I didn't try with my eyes alone. It was as if I felt blind without the glasses.

I got them, shaking, on to the hull. It was quiet, and the engine houses stood like golden tombs, and there was no moving thing but a small, white cloud, far off beyond the hill, going very slowly through the sky. I swept the glass all round, over the jumbled roofs, right from the hull to the sea and back again to the hill. Emptiness, stillness, the quiet of the dead.

For some time I leant against the stack. The dog was

agitated and whimpered a bit, asking what the hell was the matter with me.

"I don't think I can stand this through," I said. "But there's no way out. I have to stay because I can't go any more. I think my brain will burst and that'll be the end of it. Just blow up like a floating mine. Floating's the word."

I was better back in the office, but the bill had stopped flapping. I had an impulse to run down and flap it myself. The silence was like another death.

The mind spasm passed. I got down to writing again, and the dog settled by my chair.

I remember running out of the barn on Tuesday night in an absolute panic, pursued by the ponderous, bounding ball of hell behind me. I couldn't think, just felt I must scream away from it before it got me. Somewhere I heard Camm shouting, but it meant nothing. The black air round me shrieked, but I could not hear it. It was as if I went headlong at frightful speed through air and my body were the shrieking thing, not the air. My sight was terrifying. I could see ahead of me in that headlong flight, but I could see backwards through the back of my skull as well and watch that vast, tumbling pursuit.

Suddenly every movement stopped. I stood still on the dark lawn, and the air painted my face with cold sweat. I didn't breathe a minute, and then began to move slowly, automatically, a chicken running with its head cut off. I felt my legs walking clumsily without me wanting them to. I went round in a stumbling circle over the grass, panic still bubbling in my burning head. I felt my brain had come out and was bare to the hot night air. I went round and round. The barn, the house, the trees, the odd lights all reeled and lurched around me in weird caricature. I could even see through them as if they were superimposed on another picture.

I remember shouting out, again and again, "Let me ge

out! Let me get out!" Then, with my bowels falling as if my belly had opened, I walked slowly back to the barn, panic rising again as I realised, through the burning heat of my brain, what I was doing.

Camm was there, his eyeballs like great blue glass globes, his nose like an elephant's trunk his ears like bat's wings, his hands outstretched to me like the gnarled, knobbled branches of a dying oak. I shrank from him and went on into his awful grip.

"You're all right, all right," I heard him say, and he even laughed, as if with relief from some grotesque nightmare.

I looked past him and saw the awful thing had gone. There was only blackness in the great arch of the barn. He sat me in the control chair and gave me beer because there was no drinking water in there. I just guzzled. The stuff was like liquid ice in my burning head.

The actual distortions and feelings of living in nightmare went suddenly. Fear remained. The unreality of a dream that comes after shock was very strong.

He said: "It's a radiation effect."

I said: "Jesus!"

He said: "I told you it would be bad."

I said: "I feel like Jekyll, when all his guts and his brains started writhing and changing into Hyde's. Christ! It racked me from end to end. My head! Why did you do that? Why in bloody hell?"

My brain jangled, as if iron bars were clashing inside it. I told Camm and covered my ears with my hands as if that might stop it. It made it worse. I uncovered.

"It'll go," he said.

It calmed out suddenly. Instead of rolling down some night hill shut in a dustbin, I was suddenly shot out and floated in cool, calm air. I felt myself sitting firmly in the chair. I took some more beer. It tasted like beer. I was back to a normal which was going to be the best I could manage thereafter.

"It's the frequency," he said.

"You can have it," I said. "I don't want any more of that."

"It doesn't happen like that the second time," he said, with strange earnestness. "It's almost normal, then. You just feel very excited. It's not unpleasant."

"I'll take your word. I don't want to know."

He talked awhile about how he had screened the inside of the barn to stop the rays getting out as much as possible. I didn't listen. I kept having the vision of some shapeless, heaving mass moving in the middle of the earth, sightless, pitiful, terrifying. Right from the very start my claustrophobic mind felt for this Thing buried alive in the hill. But every feeling then was a wild jag upwards in my emotional graph. I had a feeling that my mind would burst out and run away from me if I let emotions jazz like that.

"What's that lopsided abortion up there to do with an animal in the hill?" I said, cutting in on him.

"It came from there," he said. "That was the world it would have known if it had come alive when it should have done."

"I don't see."

"These waves I have been using had a back-splash effect. It's assisted by this odd carrier wave I hitched on to. I've still not been able to explain what it is, but my machine has some affinity with it," he said. "During transmission to the stars there has been a splash fringe probing some distance downwards. It was a side effect I hadn't reckoned on, magnified by this carrier wave. I hooked up a receiver to read the echoes coming back from deep down. I found I got a perfect picture of the various strata of rock and metals down to a depth of several thousand feet. A mining engineer could have sat here and seen precisely where to go for his metals.

"But there was a mass gap, an inexplicable void that gave no echoes. I thought it might be some kind of me-

tallic gas that damped out the signals. But one signal did get through, in sound only.

"It was the sound of a huge, beating heart. If you like I'll show the tapes of a human heart and compare with this—"

"I don't feel like any more electronic wonders. This could be a water echo."

"It is a life pulse."

"If it's been alive some time, a seismograph would have traced it, big as you say it is."

"I have a seismograph. It registers nothing. The sound only comes on this infinite frequency I'm using."

"So it was only traced through this devil's contraption up there?"

"It's possible to have heard something of it from the bottom of the Wheal Silva shaft. But that's been flooded for ninety years."

Then I got the claustros again.

"You really going down there?"

"It might be possible to make contact that way."

"But you said it might be lethal."

"I might have a way round that. At present I'm guessing but basing my guess on what I have seen in the production of the lost Earth. I've the advantage of having been able to see things nobody else has. There are clues which could be a guide to contact with this Thing."

"Have you told anyone at all?"

"I dare not. No one *must* know. Until I have made sure that my ideas of contact are right."

"What are you afraid will happen?"

He got up. "This isn't a time for guesses. I have to go down, make contact, make sure."

"When will the mine be pumped out?"

"I speeded the pumps today. I didn't want to, but it seemed advisable."

"Keep still a minute! Why? What shook you? Surely not Peggy Pensilva?"

"She has come back unexpectedly. She owns the mine. I cannot risk anyone interfering."

"What are you afraid of us as far as the Mute's concerned?"

"If it is an infant, which I think it must be, then it might be in need of protection. Man's history does not show anything to recommend him when faced with the unknown. He has one first instinct, to kill it and retain the illusion of his own superiority. Or, if he finds the supposed menace helpless, then he will capture it and turn it into a circus act, and after that dissect it to see what's inside."

"You don't like Man, do you?"

"I rather take the view of the more intelligent animals around us, that he is ugly in body as in mind and that his stench is an offense even to his fellows. What worries me most is Man setting up God in his own image. That isn't religion, but self-love. Unfortunately, religion could have helped control his awful admiration had he let it, but religion has gone down the pan. He's looking for something else to hang on to and can't think of anything. This makes for greater and greater fear, where the only security is found in brute force, which goes in the weird name of Defence. To reveal the presence of this infant is to hand it over to the men who believe in appalling things. I refuse to do that."

"Your only fear is that they might kill it?"

"John, this affair is far, far bigger than anything you have imagined. It isn't a question of them trying to kill it only, but what forces they will release if they do try. There is a hope for us that this Being has not the small, vengeful mind of a man, and that by this we might be spared. But the Thing is an infant. You have to think of it like that. An infant who might stumble at the start. If it does, God help us. There won't be anybody else who can."

"But how? Do you know how it can kill people?"

He couldn't answer the question and wasn't going to guess. It wasn't to be long before we found out.

As a coward I didn't want to dwell on the death-dealing power of something we couldn't fight—or shouldn't try to fight. I just wanted to try and get some justification for Camm's grim forecast.

He walked up and down a lot. Loping, double-jointed, he could have been an eccentric dancer.

"What have you found out about this Thing so far?"

He stopped then. "Too little to say."

"Well, you keep saying 'big.' Do you mean big event-wise or big bigwise?"

He grimaced and showed his teeth. "I work on the ratio of the old world to this present one. In mass it was fifty times bigger."

"Good God! A monster!" The image of the blinded, writhing Thing below ground became bigger, blacker in my thoughts; but still I was in the realm of antediluvian monsters, the Brontosaurus, the mastodons. "But if it's four thousand feet down, at the bottom end of a narrow crack, it could never get up here!"

"It will get up here," Camm said. "It will be here not very long hence. I have made a rough calculation by astronomy. You'll see if I'm right."

"How soon?" My inside quivered.

"Seventy-five hours, approximately."

The quivering became a sudden, swooping void.

He started walking again, talking all the time, enlarging on the need for secrecy. He didn't have to. I had grasped the point and felt it red hot.

"What I fear is that someone will find out about it through trying to get at my—" he waved his graceful hand at the ranks of silent metal robots, "—devil's contraption. That has a vast value commercially, either developed or destroyed. It is that which has led to the great discovery, and I'm frightened it will be that which might give it away."

"But what's given you this sudden feeling somebody is trying to find out?"

"A hunch. An atmosphere of warning. It came suddenly very strongly today, almost a foresight, an inspiration."

"You mean you had no reason? The idea just came?"

"Lots of ideas just come. This one is very strong. I feel sure myself. That's why I feel I must hurry things up, get contact sooner than I meant to do."

"If the Thing can get up, why go down?"

"There must be a mediator. Every possible precaution must be taken. This is the only chance of contact in many millions of years. It may never occur again. Surely that's enough to try and make sure nothing goes wrong?"

He went on on those lines. Again I felt my mind drifting back to the Thing rather than the consequences it might bring.

"Did your radio probe wake it up? Is that what you mean?"

"It made a first contact, but I can't read any echo. I don't think it awakened it. I feel this carrier wave X has something to do with it, but I can't see how. No. What I think is likely is that some earth disturbance shifted the embalming gas down there and the ovum began to develop after the long suspension."

"What sort of disturbance?"

"The sinking of the Wheal Silva shaft."

"But that was over a hundred years ago!"

"Fifty times mass, fifty times span, could be. It's quite useless to try and measure this Being by any of our little rules." He laughed suddenly. "Bring it down to Earth for yourself. Go to the library tomorrow. See if there is any story or report or trace mentioned in the mining books—anything that might suggest something could be heard at the deepest levels. I seem to remember something but can't quite recall it."

He went slack all of a sudden and looked tired and old.

He turned and began snapping switches off.

"Come up in the morning," he said, his voice cracked with all the talking he had done. "Early. Just for a few minutes. I'm tired now. I must rest a bit."

"You won't—try going down by yourself?"

He looked back. "I'll wait till you're here."

I went out of the barn with him. He walked away, back to the house. I think it was then that I realised he had taken away my small familiar world and replaced it with a gaudy nightmare where every new thought meant a choking catch of the breath. It wasn't just going back to a lost world of recognisable monster reptiles, but to something that skewered right into the brain.

As if the Thing, with all its horror, was in my mind, complete and real.

Looking at the hill cutting the moonlit sky and thinking of a trapped animal in it didn't bring the kind of horror I wanted to feel; a horror I could understand. The horror wouldn't jell, but seemed to be part of that awful ghost of a lost world, that overbalanced, bulging monstrosity where we had begun all our lives.

What I didn't see was the meaning of the coincidence. The meaning of the fact that the image of the long past had directed the finding of the Thing in the hill.

As he went into the house I felt for the first time a weird excitement, some kind of subconscious emotion. It made the dull pain in my head beat like a clanging, yet it was a kind of elation. I thought it was the effects of the radiation.

I drove away, meaning to go to Peggy's. I drove on by, several miles later I turned right-angled, a few miles more, then angled again, turning back. I was like a fish on a line being let run. I went back, going slower with every mile I got nearer to the valley. I used the track up under the old railway and saw the grey piles of the ruined buildings standing on the slopes, black patched with

the moonlight. It was like a scene from another planet. The silence was complete, the stillness a kind of magic. The beating in my head stopped. There was suddenly a lack of sensual feeling, no pain, no sensations at all. A kind of mental freedom, as if the spirit drifted out of the pained carcass. The drifting in the silence was a sensation without distance, my position could not be fixed. I could reach out and put my finger in the pock marks on the Moon. The ground of the hill was a thousand miles below me. There were stars all round, and I could see in all directions at once, to right, to left, above me, below me, behind me. I was adrift, free of any ties.

I was off my nut.

Realisation returned with a jolt, making the clang in my head worse. I was out of my depth. My mind wasn't big enough to get hold of the thing Camm was playing with. His radiation was doing my nut up too tight.

I went back down the track, drove away, past the Pensilva house. A mile on I turned and went back. When I met her she smiled as if she knew how I had dithered on the end of my line. I felt a fool and enraged with her. But she was real. The weird sensations of the hill were not.

I wanted to forget the shocking new things, the things that pursued from the farm in the valley. I wanted to forget them, lose them in the comforting warmth of Mother's bosom. Or Peggy's.

I awoke at 4 A.M. Wednesday. The stars were bright through the open windows and silhouetted the hill against the sky. While I fumbled for my clothes she moved in the bed.

"Are you going?" she said.

"Yes."

"To Camm?"

It seemed like a thought reader's question, shocking.

"Yes."

"You called out twice when you were asleep."

I dressed slowly, cold with a growing terror.

'I used to do it at school. The matron fussed. It was always battle cries. What was this?'

"You said, 'Stop it, Camm!' and 'Don't bring it back!'"

I buttoned my shirt. The hill seemed to be getting nearer as I watched it.

"I must have had a nightmare," I said.

I put my jacket over my arm and went for the door. In the starlight I saw her white arm reaching out to me from the bed. I took her hand and kissed it. She held on to mine.

"Come back, in the morning, about twelve. I want to talk about the book."

She laughed and squeezed my hand.

"Get me a drink," she said.

I drove across the moor and down the track to the farm. The last hundred yards I switched off, and the cracking of the stones under my tyres was all the sound there was. Inside the gate I stopped and got out onto the lawn. It was very still, warm, but awakening with the edge of excitement of a new day. There is no time so tinged with startling promise as the still starry night before dawn. Far off I heard the rumble of the mail diesel going into Liskeard. It faded and there was silence again.

There was none of the weirdie feeling of the past night in this quiet. It was normal. I walked round the house to the barn. It reared up, grey against the stars. It looked like some kind of evil chapel.

There was a chunk of light showing in the cracks of one set of twenty-foot-high doors. I went to the small entrance at the end and pushed the door. It opened and I went in.

Camm was fixing something beyond his control desk. I leaned against a computer and remember feeling a great relief that none of his hell stuff was working.

"Camm, when did you get the idea for this?"

"The origin? I don't know. A culmination of years of

working on certain lines. Then I saw other possibilities. I wasn't going to let it go to war, so I kept it to myself. That must have been eight years ago."

"Down here?"

"It was in this area I first traced that carrier wave. I couldn't reach it then. I can't reach it now, mainly because I'm sure it isn't radio at all. There's nothing mechanical about it, no recognisable feature of ordinary means of generation."

"You said it went straight up, this beam or whatever it is?"

"It beams out, yes. But don't think it's there all the time. It isn't."

"You mean your horror picture can't work when it isn't beaming?"

"It works, but not so well."

"Which way round did it go? Did you find this leap-frog radio first and see a way of recreating the vision of the lost world? Or did you want to see that vision and find a way to do it?"

"I found a way to do it, based on the work of the last twenty years."

"And you got the idea of doing it—seeing the lost world, I mean, down here?"

"Yes. The moors have an atmosphere. I can't explain it. It might be I'm sensitive to the vast mineral content of this area."

"Did you get the idea anywhere? Did you feel the same atmosphere anywhere else?"

"That's an impossible question. How can I remember what I've felt in every damn place I've been?"

"Well, try."

"What's the matter with you?" He came near me then, searching my face with his bright blue eyes. "Have you had bad dreams?"

"This Thing in the hull," I said, the word dreams bringing the Mute right into focus, "you found it sud-

denly with this machine? Just a heartbeat? You weren't looking for it?"

"It came the way I said. In periods of good radio, I got this probe effect downwards."

"Periods of good working means when that carrier wave X was on?"

"Certainly."

"Have you ever traced those beats any other time, when the carrier wasn't working?"

"No. It takes this amplification to bring it close up in the receivers."

"Well, look. Couldn't it be some double pulse thud, some coincident rhythm produced by a dissonance in the frequencies you're using? You say you can't tune right in with this wave. Well, if you get two sounds fighting each other you get a third sound, a beat, a thump, call it what you like. Couldn't it be that?"

"No."

"You mean you know, apart from heartbeats, that there is something alive down there?"

He put his face close to mine then and watched me.

"Don't *you* know?" he said.

That was the shock. I was working on the base that he alone believed it, but when he said that, I knew I did too. But not through him. We'd known each other much too well for me to have any idea that he was infallible.

"It's that ruddy machine of yours," I said. "It gets you so shrieking mad you'd believe anything!"

He grinned, shrugged and turned away. I followed him.

"What I'm trying to get at is, did this Thing give you the idea of finding it down there, sometime when you were walking the moor or exploring the mines years ago?"

"How could anyone answer that? Where do ideas come from? From something read and long forgotten? From some word somebody once said that grew up in

the mould of the brain? One thing is certain, ideas come from something. They don't come from nowhere. They may come from a seed planted in your brain by an ancestor a hundred, two hundred years before, like red hair, or tallness or rabbit's teeth. They do not come from nothing. They come from something now or a thousand years ago."

"Well, can't you remember if you ever thought of such a thing as some animal trapped down in the hill? In those days when you felt the moor had an atmosphere?"

"My mind is like the witch's stock pot," he said. "I could have thought of anything."

"Were you surprised when you got this trace of a living Thing down there?"

"At the time I was surprised by the back echo effect of my waves. That was the major shock, if you like. Like you, I didn't think of heartbeats. At first I wasn't interested enough to wonder what they were. My first problem was this unexpected side effect. Then slowly I began to think about the pulse."

"Sometimes you concentrate on a thing so hard you can't see anything else. Is that why you can't remember how this started? Because you stared so close you didn't notice what was around?"

"What's the matter with you? Don't you think I've asked these questions of myself a hundred times? I can't bloody well remember, because when it all began it wasn't important! I was thinking of other things, of wars and war machines and idiot men who wanted to use everything I had to blow their bloody arses off with. They chased me, they haunted me. I got to a point when I thought I was trapped by them. And when I came down here and walked the free moor it gave relief from these people who were making me hate them and all other people with them. In a muddle of mind and emotion like that do you think I could remember what the moor put into my head? All I remember is that it put peace in,

and that was the prime mover in bringing me down here. The checks I made on the radio properties came after. It was peace I found then, the rainbow's end—the crock of gold—peace!”

He breathed hard after the outburst, then let out a great sigh and relaxed.

“There's no peace now,” I said.

“There will be—after,” he said.

He wouldn't say any more. He got on with adjusting some small radio and then tested it with a receiver in the control desk. The claustrophobic fear of him going down that mine came again. I felt a sudden rise of panic.

“You can't go down there,” I said. “It's dangerous. All the timbers will be rotten.”

He stared at me. His jaw was hard, and I could see the muscles bunching under his ears. He had looked at me sometimes like that when I was small, and it had always frightened me.

“It won't be that dangerous,” he said. “I persuaded U.I. Plastics Division to let me have this.” He went over to what looked like a set of frogman's back-fitting air tanks, and lifted the brace up. “These tanks are filled with new plastic—”

And he reeled off one of those alkapolyollydiddle-ithene names they make up like trains in a shunting yard.

“This nozzle fits in front of the chest,” he said. “And from it extrudes a thin plastic rope as and when wanted. It's sticky.”

“Like a spider.”

“Always borrowing, aren't we?” He laughed. “This lower fitting under the nozzle has a set of duralumin gears which grip the rope like nut-crackers. Driven by transistor motors and a battery in the left-hand tank, one can climb vertically at nearly two hundred feet a minute.”

“You're a fool, Camm. What can you do for this Thing? Alone?”

"Help it. And help us."

I tried a lot of persuasion on him, almost feeling it was myself in danger. He just didn't listen.

"Camm!" I shouted at him. "Think a minute about that poor, damn animal in the hill. You know what'll happen. It's trapped, and it'll fight whoever goes down there!"

He shook his head.

"You don't understand," he said, and took his pipe off the desk. "Get a more familiar subject. I want a copy typist up here who can take from tapes. I want her as soon as possible. There are a lot of notes I want tabbed. Do that, will you?"

He jolted me back. I felt confused. The barn made me like that.

"I'll see. They get picked up in the summer. Tycoons on holiday."

"Don't you know somebody in the town?"

"Can't think, offhand. I'll give you a ring. What are you going to put down? Not this—?" I pointed out the door to the hill.

"Good God, no! Some things I want to get sorted out and filed."

It gave me a cold feeling. "You're not, sort of, getting things together, are you? In case anything happens?"

"My dear Johnny, I'm sixty-five. Anything could happen any time. Things ought to be set in order."

"Specially now?" He had the feeling something would happen. We had too much sympathy in common, too much of a telepathic understanding. I knew what he meant. I could feel it.

And I could feel that he was right, but not in the way I thought then.

"Don't be so bloody sentimental," he said. "You're worse than a woman."

"Look," I said, "put it off. There might be another way. You'll think of something."

"This is essential."

It wasn't any use arguing.

I said: "You won't try anything till I'm here?"

"Be here around five, I want you to keep watch." He pointed to the vast empty space in the barn roof.

"Not that thing!" Fear came like a cramp, hurting.

"It won't affect you again, Johnny. And I particularly ask you this. Particularly." He watched my face, then said: "I have rigged a magnifying camera here." He pointed to a camera angled on to the empty space, and set beyond the desk. "It will give a close-up of part of the globe image. This part. This very valley, or whatever was here all that time ago. You should be able to see details. You can zoom with this control here. The enlarged picture will be projected in the space there--the hayloft. Do you see?"

The cramp eased. It might not be so bad if I didn't see the whole orb of the obscene thing. Perhaps a detail of it would be no more than looking down on the valley from a height. It was a coward's solution; frightened even of being frightened. Any easy way to wriggle round.

He could see me weakening. He smiled a cracked sort of grin.

"That part of the globe --this part that was--will come round about six-fifteen. It was a forty-hour day then. All the instructions for switching on are, 'snap this one here.' The rest will be programmed to set themselves automatically for this one occasion. It will unscramble after, so that no one else--so that no one can switch it on accidentally."

"A burglar-proof combination."

A sudden uneasiness came into my mind, not caused by Camm now, but by myself. Until that moment, I hadn't remembered about talking in my sleep. The idea of the machines being protected against spies brought it back like a sudden blow-up in a film, big and shocking.

"You'll do it for me?" he said.

Shock kicked me another way, like a football in a crazy game.

"You mean you're going down then?"

"Before. I dare not risk waiting. I'm sure there has been a leak."

"Why so sure? Did something happen?"

"Cardon rang me an hour back."

"Funny time."

"Funny urgency. He had heard of something going on down here from someone at the Press Club. He's chairman of my old company. He's bloody annoyed, and I'm bloody alarmed. It's your woman. One of the reasons I want a secretary up here is to hold off whoever comes. You'll have to hold up the press. Luckily, you're in the position to do it."

"You're loading me," I said bitterly. "I'm only a camel, remember."

"This straw is in the wind still," he said. "It needn't touch your back."

I got back to my cottage at five-fifteen. When I opened the door I smelt scent. The light was on in the living room.

Leila was sitting on my sofa, drinking tea.

"Hallo," she said, watching me with her big blue eyes. "Have some tea."

"Hallo," I said, and poured some. "How in hell did you get in?"

"I always had a key—remember? You said keep it to remind me, that night you got tight and proposed."

Her eyes were bright as they watched me.

"But what are you doing here? Near dawn."

"He went too far last night. He hit me. I walked out. It was terrible. I felt everybody knew, everybody had heard us shouting. There was nowhere else to go. Just here. I cried all night. You should have been here."

"You didn't come back to the office yesterday."

"I'm not going back. Not after yesterday."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"Go somewhere. Get another job. They're a pound a hundred."

"Craike'll sob."

"I'm sorry about Craike. He's a dear."

"You don't need to run away just because of yesterday."

"I need time to think."

"Camm wants a stenog," I said. "A few days up at the farm. Starting now. That'll give you time."

"How long for?"

I felt an odd twinge about how many days to *it*.

"Two or three days. I don't know. Think about it. Ring him when you know. Otherwise I'll have to try a Plymouth agency."

She frowned at the floor. Looking at her I could feel the stirring in me for her. I suppose it never really goes, once you have known it. No matter what happens, you keep all the girls you loved, somewhere close inside. Maybe two, or three, and perhaps one more than all the others, but they all stay there.

I went to the kitchen.

"Why did he hit you? Just lost himself?"

"It's this insane jealousy. It twists you all ways. If you're sweet to him, it's because you're hiding something. If you're not, it's because you're in love with somebody else. You can't win. He's going mad with it."

"You shouldn't have told him about us. You should have gone along with Clara Softheart's Column: Your past is your own. It's when you mix it with now the pudding blows up."

"But it's insane, this kind of jealousy! It's murder. You just can't get past it. Everything's twisted into what he wants to think. As if he lives for torturing himself!"

I let her go on. Obviously she'd been simmering it all night, and it did her good to let it out now. I had another

cup of tea. I made another pot and drank that before she had it all out.

The funny thing was, my old feelings were there, and she had my sympathy. But my old fierce love didn't come back. I suppose it was cowardice, the fear that if it did come back, she'd ditch me as before. I didn't want those emotions all over again.

The sun was up and bright when she was pretty calm again.

It was then she gave the double twist.

"You'll feel better," I said, and kissed her.

She smelt Peggy. I could see it. It had been scent on my collar or something, for I hadn't changed then. She pushed me back, and the Dosmary Pool eyes blazed as if Excalibur was in each one.

"You've been with her!" She just whispered between her teeth. "You've been with *her*!"

For a moment she just stood there and then turned her back.

"I'll go to Camm," she said.

"All right," I said. "I'll ring him about ten. He only just went to bed when I left him."

She looked round at me, flinging her head a bit upwards with all the scorn of an actress letting it go. Then she went. Her golden hair had that sweet untidy cut, like a chrysanthemum.

I remember it as she went out and slammed the door.

III

Barker rang up another couple of times. I wish he wouldn't. The bell jumps my heart as if somebody's behind me, and it spoils the sense of loneliness. I'd sooner be entirely alone, just with the dog now. It's better. You get no strength from frightened people, only fear.

The bill started flapping again at about eight-thirty.

There is something funny about Jason. Sometimes he looks up before the phone goes, as if he knows it'll go. Other times he just lies there by my chair and flops his tail on the floor when I start talking.

The last time Fatty Barker said:

"We keep getting an echo from up the hill."

"And I keep telling you there's nothing up there! Have you forgotten that when it happens *I'll know!*"

"Of course we haven't forgotten, but we keep getting an echo. It won't pinpoint. It's just a smear on the tube, but it's an echo. It must be something."

"It's a Pearl Harbor ghost," I said. "It's me you've got to depend on, not that pot-eyed scanner. Any kid could jam it with a do-it-yourself kit. It's real science you're up against now, not your modern tinpot echopinging."

"You're all right, are you?"

"I'm all right except when you ring up and tell me

you're not!" I shouted at him. "Look, you can see there's nothing going on! You've got tele-transmitters on every roof for bloody miles, mains ones, battery ones, even gas ones for all I know. If you can't see from those there's nothing happening, then you—"

"When we get the echo the engineers say the pictures jazz," he said.

"What, all of them?" I forgot how many cameras they rigged up on the roofs watching the town. They had cameras with their own transmitters, battery driven; direct electric things pumping the picture through the mains themselves, and others sending on the telephone lines. They got every way to send a picture out of St. Cary rigged up, including just ordinary auto film cameras, for posterity, or in case the rest all blew up.

"Yes, all of them," Fatty said.

"You didn't say it before."

"We weren't sure. We thought there was some ordinary interference. But it's all of them when we get the echo from the hill. We've tied it up now."

"Is the echo there all the time?"

"No. It comes and goes."

"Well, there's nothing happening. Now ring off. I've got writing to do. I'm shoving everything down. It stops the edges of my mind flying off."

"You sure you're all right?"

"Bang!" I bawled it into the cup as loudly as I could and slammed down.

Every time he rings he breaks my thoughts. I have to go back. That's why the tape wasn't any good. You have to keep running the thing back. It jerks your nerves. Reading back is peaceful. It doesn't make any noise. You can hear the bill flapping still.

Echo echo echo echo echo. It's a word that sounds like an echo. It was Wednesday, surely it was Wednesday—

Yes, Wednesday. That was the day I tried the library

about the mine. It was hotter than ever. It took three minutes to get across the street through the traffic, and you could see the blue exhaust smoke going up lazily like a poison gas. They say it doesn't hurt after all. So long as they can sell it, of course it won't hurt. You just die gasping, with lungs like the inside of a crankcase. But comfort! The chap that's selling it's no better off. He's dying too.

Old Harvey the librarian keeps his best Cornish books locked up away from the thieving hands of the general public.

"Wheal Silva?" he said. "Yes, there's a story of a ghost down there. Let's see, that's in *Cornish Mines*, I think." So he got the book and looked it up, and there it was. "A ghost, like somebody walking about very slowly. At the north end of the lowest level, that's seventeen hundred feet."

"And the date of that yarn?"

"You're doing an article, I suppose," he said, and flipped pages. "Yes. First recorded in 1877 when the lowest level was driven."

"That's getting on a hundred years," I said, and I got the sensation of my heart collapsing.

When I got back in the office Craike was there, reading the week's edition of the *St. Cary Times*, just out. He always read the first edition right through, though he knew it all already and it was too late to do anything, even if he found something wrong.

"Ever heard anything about a ghost in Wheal Silva, Craike?"

He looked up over the paper with one eye. He always used his memory by screwing up one eye, as if that was the tap that released the goods.

"The Thump," he said. "Let's see. When was that? During the war. Yes. A radar unit up there before D day, got some kind of thump echo, or whatever they call it. But it didn't jell. They couldn't trace it. I did a story.

Tied it up with the old story of the ghost of Wheal Silva. The damned censor blotted it out. Wouldn't release it till after the war. Then it was dead. Never printed it. You want to use it? It was obviously only water movement down in the old workings. Shouldn't waste too much time on it."

"Leila isn't coming in for a few days."

He let the paper down till it rested flat on his legs, and looked at me. I thought I could see fury coming; curse all the English, drive them out of Kernow, blow the bridges. But it didn't.

"How did you get on with Peggy P.?"

He watched me.

"Fine," I said. "She wants me to do a book."

"You look as if you were all night talking about it." He was sharp, bitter about something. "Where did you see Leila?"

"She called in before I left. At home."

The two girls were typing busily at the far corner of the big room. Craike looked towards them, then back at me.

"I had an anon phone call she left your place at six-fifteen this morning," he said. "What are you trying to do? Run a divorce or a murder for our next edition?"

"That's talk. I was with Camm."

"It's a book P. wants, is it?" he said, switching again.

"She told you."

"She might have said she did, but she says anything. Words are her servants. So is everybody else. You'll find out. Books." He cocked his head and stared out of the window at the sky. "Maybe." He swung his feet to the floor and got up suddenly. "Why don't you go to London? Get out of this. Do something for yourself. Get away from tangling with these small-time beauties." He was furious, but he spoke low and hard, close to me so the girls couldn't hear.

"Perhaps I will," I said, and surprised myself.

He just turned away and went to the washroom, scratching his back the way he always made his shirt come out of his trousers. He hadn't read the edition, for the first time in ten years.

I remember I had the fatalistic feeling that everything was going wrong. People were changing all around, and as they couldn't all change it must be me.

I went out.

In the car park behind the office I saw Jason sitting on top of his master's garden wall. He got up and wagged at me, then jumped down. We went off into the Green Park. His master was busy that day staking up on the St. Leger.

It was quiet by the river, and I sat down there. I was very agitated and upset. The dog knew, for he sat close by and rested his head on my knee, watching me. My feelings went out of hand. So did my mind. Suddenly they were all round me, great slide-jointed mouths clattering at me, Camm, Leila, Peggy Pensilva, Craike. They were monstrous caricatures, overpainted, their raging glass eyeballs glaring at me. I shut my eyes. They were there still. I put my hands over my ears to stop their clattering wooden faces yelling at me. The sound and the garish colours faded, and then I heard the river tumbling quietly on the stones.

The dog pushed my knee with his chin, trying to make me look at him.

I was off my nut. That was it. Something in the radiation had got me. The clanging in my head beat as if my heart was racing, trying to burst.

And then suddenly, a separation came; an ending of physical sensation, a kind of mental floating. There was a whispering, not of words, but of meanings, way out on the fringes of my vast mind. Once again I could see everything, know everything, but again, I couldn't get hold

of it and turn it into real meaning. As the floating sensation ended and sense returned I had the feeling of scrabbling on a rock face, trying to hold on to it, but it wasn't rock. It had no surface. It was a great glassy void I was trying to cling to.

The sweat was on. I got up, my head beating, my face burning. The bright colours of the flowers and the greens of the grass and trees were jazzed up with colour splodges swimming in my own eyes.

I was ill. I had radiation sickness.

But suddenly it was gone, and I heard children playing, shrill little voices against the background of traffic beyond the trees. Things were normal again all round me. The only abnormal thing was me.

We walked back into the car park. Jason got up on his wall and stood still, watching me to see if this was the end of the walk. When he saw it was, he went down and watched me go, with his face on his paws.

It was too early to go to Peggy. But I had to move somewhere. I got my car out from a jam near the gates and just drove aimlessly. It was while motoring the quiet lanes that I found I was being followed by a Mini.

Not just any old Mini, but that souped-up chequer-painted stinker Tom had had such a job to get insured. It was an unpleasant sensation, being followed by an outraged husband. After yesterday's performance in the office, I got the jack handle out when I stopped.

But the Mini stopped a long way back. When I went on again, he went on. When I stopped at The Sun Inn, he stopped a hundred yards short of it. I went to the inn, got a shandy and wondered why everything was going downhill so fast.

Here was another face to join the ring of garish, clattering accusers. My guilt was coming over me like a black awning.

I could see the only explanation of the change in all of

them was a reaction to a change in me. But I couldn't take it down. I couldn't see what could have changed outwardly. I know too well things were changing inwardly.

I was very depressed. That was another sign of madness.

Just now the phone rang three times, but there was nobody there. The dog got worried each time and started whimpering. We went up on the roof, but everything was still. Down by the lake in Green Park I saw a couple of sea gulls. They looked dazed, as if wondering why there were no ploughs to follow roundabout. I wished I could see a slugging tractor up on one of the rising fields, and the cloud of eager, following gulls, linen-white in the sun. It had been a friendly scene.

It seemed the gulls didn't like the silence. They took off and wheeled away back to the sea. No easy food today; they would have to fish. When they had gone, there was nothing left.

We went down to the office. I rang Barker.

"Did you ring ten minutes ago?"

"No. Not for an hour nearly."

"You'd better have this line checked. It keeps ringing."

"Willco. You all right?"

I put down and wrote a bit. I was glad when the bell went again.

"Engineer testing. Your line's okay."

"Well, it's been ringing with nobody ringing."

"Like what?"

"Like burr-burr, burr-burr!" I shouted.

"All right. Don't burst. You mean a normal ring?"

"Yes."

"But there's nobody in town, is there? You're on a direct line here now. I don't see how anybody could cut in on it. I'll check up."

He rang off. The idea that somewhere in this silence there could be someone hiding, someone who hadn't gone, filled me with a kind of rage, a hatred that anyone should be here, secretly sharing my madness.

This is my world. Mine. They gave it to me. I said, "Right!" didn't I? and it's mine. Mine. Mine. Mine. Mine. Mine. Nobody has any rights to hide here. It must be empty, because it's mine.

Suddenly I realised the bill had stopped flapping. I listened but it didn't sound. I leaned out of the window, but the masonry overhangs the pavement and I couldn't see down to where the billboard was leaning. I listened. It didn't flap.

I got scared. We ran downstairs and out to the pavement. The bit had torn right off. It was gritting away on the pavement, just moving in the breeze. I leaned against the wall, watching it. It seemed like part of the world fallen away. I was so empty I felt sick.

Then I heard the phone ringing from out of the window up there. I bent down and tore another bit of the bill so it would flap again, but it wouldn't be the same. I knew that.

When I got the phone there was nobody on the end, just the mush of an open line.

Then I rang through and the engineer said: "We had a surge then."

"What sort of a surge?"

"A power surge. A sort of induction of energy. The meter kicked right over."

"Well, get it right. It's bad enough when somebody calls. I don't want it surging on its own!"

"I don't see how it could go burr-burr like you said. Usually a dud ring is a ting or a long one. You can't get the metered ringing without—"

"I'm getting it and I'm without. Now get on and stop it!"

I rang off and listened. The bill wasn't flapping. The

sweat iced on my face. I went to the window and listened, but it didn't flap.

Perhaps the breeze had died down. It must flap soon.

The road was empty when I drove on from The Sun, but in a minute or two that damn Mini with the chequered stripes on came up behind like some kind of mangy cat.

We came up onto the moor, and I turned left to go back to town. He followed, then peeped and came by, making some row with his exhaust echo box. He went ahead, flashed his brake lights and waved a huge arm out of the window, flagging me down. I pulled in behind him when he stopped, my heart going hard.

I got out on the road. He came out of the Mini like some inflatable giant being pumped into view. He stood looking at me, his face red, his big fists hanging at his sides.

He bent and reached in the Mini, dragged out a suitcase and chucked it onto the road so it skidded in front of my car and jammed under the bumper.

"There's her things!" he shouted. "Tell her I'll send the rest when she's settled in. You're a bloody coward. A bloody coward!"

Then he shrank into the car and let out blurts of angry exhaust before he screamed away round the bend. I think I waited there listening to the angry little car till it had gone into the distant hum of lots more, then I wrenched the case out from the metalwork and stowed it behind the seats.

As I drove away it seemed that the gesture he'd made had been chucking his wife at me as well.

I went back to town and into the King Doniert. Craike was sitting in one of the pews with a Cornish pasty and beer. He stared at me as if he didn't want to but there was nowhere else to look.

"Jenkins came on from London," he said, with a kind

of snarl. "He wants to know what Camm's up to. It's getting to be a crowd. You might as well find out, mightn't you? Otherwise it looks that somebody else will."

Then he took his paper off the table and held it up, cutting me off. I went back to the bar. I saw the chattering dummy faces round me again. The only one I could think of who hadn't got a knife in my back then was the dog.

That damn bill won't flap. I've been down twice and torn it again in different places, but it won't flap like the first bit did.

There's been one call. The engineer has got the idea I'm going barmy and imagining the ringing, because he says it can't ring like that. If he comes on again I'm going to fire the pistol across the mike and blow his eardrum in.

IV

Four o'clock Wednesday. Peggy Pensilva rang me at the office.

"The streams are filling up down below here," she said. "What's Camm doing? Using water for cooling? Or where's it coming from?"

"I don't know. Perhaps there's a spring come up."

"This weather? It's been a dry summer. Remember?" She sounded angry. "This can't go on. I must see him. Make an appointment for me this evening, Johnny. Say it's urgent. No one's answering the phone there."

"I'm going up later, I'll ring you back."

She rang off. I wiped my face. The guilt, the necessity to hide the Thing in the hill became like hiding some crime.

I had the dim idea then that what was changing me for these other people was my furtive defence of something they could know nothing about. My feeling for the suffering animal in the hell of the hill was brutally defensive, as if I suspected every normal little motive these people had in their normal ways.

At least, getting such an idea showed I was not all mad yet. Not quite isolated. Yet still I was getting panicky.

At five I was at the farm. Camm was very fidgety, his

hand trembling as he lit his pipe and listened to what I said about Peggy.

"She mustn't come up here!" he said. "Nobody must come tonight." He started an agitated pacing. "They're forcing me on. I'll have to go down, John. I'll have to go down now. Cardon was on the phone again. I've stopped the girl answering. They're like vultures gathering round me. They'll try and kill it if they find out. You know that. We've got to get to it before they know, before they find out, before they suspect what it is. Otherwise there'll be bloody disaster!"

He went on marching up and down on his long, spindly legs. I knew the feeling he had. I had it myself. It was the radiation. The panic, the guilt, the sweating heat of suspense at watching the searchers closing in round us.

"They're bound to come," I said. "I've had half a dozen calls today. Each query represents another dozen in the syndicates behind it. Once they're on they won't let go. Not answering the phone is lunacy. It's inviting them to come in person."

"I told you to tell 'em something to keep 'em away! Why don't you do it?"

"I don't think I could without letting something slip."

"You're used to lying, stalling people off. What's the matter with you now?"

"I've got the feeling it matters too much. I don't know what's happened to me. I feel I'm going bonkers. I'm getting guilt sessions, panic for nothing, depression like an ink bath. I'm getting some kind of floating other mind that comes and goes like a bloody fog on the moors—"

He grabbed my arm with his bony fingers.

"You'll get used to it. You don't understand yet. I'm not sure myself, but once I get down there we shall know."

"It's the damn radiation off your machines!"

"Only partly," he said. "How long can you hold these dogs off?"

"I can't hold them off at all! They'll be around in a matter of hours—"

"Get to it. Think of something. Tell them anything, just till tomorrow. After tonight we'll have more space to breathe."

"There's the woman—Mrs. Pensilva. You can't keep her out. She's your landlord, and her tenants' chickens are floating away on your damn water."

He stared at me with a sudden penetration.

"You can deal with her," he said.

"You don't know her. She'll be harder to stall than a pack of journalists. Look. Let's be rational to start with. Get Leila answering the phone again. Don't start any silence that's going to make them suspicious."

He laughed suddenly and slapped my back.

"All right. Now go and fill 'em up. Anything. Coaxial parallelism in dluvian antimagnetics. Go on. You're in charge. Pull up the drawbridge."

I went into the house. Leila was typing Camm's stuff from a tape. She looked eagerly at me as if I ought to have something for her. She looked very beautiful.

"Tom threw your case at me," I said. "He said he'll send the rest."

It hurt her, and for some reason I was glad. A minute later I wanted to cry about it.

She got me the *London Tribune* on her line.

"About Camm," I told them.

"Good boy. I'll get you a tape in case it's technical."

"I don't know anything technical. It's light bending."

"Light bending? What the hell's that?"

"It's something impossible," I said. "Camm's going to make it curve round."

"What for?"

"Something to do with laser development. I can't make anything of it. Better get your science correspondent on it. He'll probably think of some reason for it."

It acted. It stalled them. I got on to others and repeated

with variations. They all treated it with puzzled respect.

All except the *News*.

"We've got Derek flying down there now."

I had a hot and cold bath.

"What? Why?"

"We had a blow Camm is getting something up out of the mine there."

"But that's just bloody daft!" I said. "He's not a miner!"

"We just want to know about the mine," they said. "It's a solid blow. Somebody phoned it in from down there."

"When?"

"This morning. Derek will go and see this person—Mrs. Pensilva. Do you know her?"

"Yes. And I happen to know she isn't there tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because she'll be with me," I said, and rang off. Leila was sitting at her desk, watching me. "Get the airport, page Derek Branch when the flight lands. Ask him to ring me here."

While we waited, I felt my nerves stretched out like miles of thinning wire. I told Camm.

"That's it!" he said sharply. "I'm going down. You watch the scanner for that magnification later. I've got this—" He held up a small sender-receiver. "We'll be in touch through the radio on my control desk. You must turn the vision on by six. *Must!* That will allow for warming up. Don't forget. If you miss it then, it won't be there again for forty hours. We can't spare that time."

His face was tight and hard. It made me realise how old he was.

The Branch call came in while we were talking in the garden. I ran back in. Branch's flight had just got in, and he was vague. He gets airsick from tensions.

"Look, re Mrs. Pensilva—" I said, and told him she was busy.

He swallowed it.

"Okay," he said, "I'll be at the Royal Clarence tonight. Give me a buzz in the morning."

"Surely." It was a kind of pressurised sigh. I went out and told Camm.

"You don't know how many other snoopers there might be," he said. He looked hard-jawed enough to be one of the wooden-faced dolls I kept imagining. "I'm going. Keep watch—and guard them against their own noses."

We walked down the track to the shaft. It was as if he just had to go. As if he had been sentenced to go. I kept trying to fight my acceptance of his need to go down there. It didn't work.

At the shaft wall I watched him clamber over and start getting into the spider harness. I didn't look at him but at a small stack of alloy ladders. I wanted to ask him the real reason why he must go down.

But he didn't know. He genuinely didn't know. He was a wise man following a star. He knew it was there and couldn't think why. But his career had been one of crossing thresholds into the unknown. It hadn't changed now. The difference was only that he was not going forward physically, but millions of years back. And with all these curves the mathematicians talk about, backwards could amount to forwards, given enough distance to curve right round. And a thousand million years seemed enough to me.

The imagined vision came suddenly of a dark struggling mass down there trying to get out, trapped, bursting with fear if anyone should come near.

"Don't do it, Camm! Wait! Let it come up!"

"I must contact first. I explained it to you. I must go down. I accelerated the pumps. The water's clear down to the sump now."

"The village down there is afloat, she said."

"Stall the woman off."

"I shan't be able to!"

He looked at me and then turned to the hole.

"Then give her my regards," he said. "Tell her the flooding is going down and that I will call on her in the morning."

He tested his lamp, hitched it to the harness. He felt his nylon rope, his knife, a couple of metal boxes on the belt, then fixed the radio at the side of his collar.

"Pull the ladders up after me," he said. "I'm going down as far as the first ledge of the man engine. Then I spin down."

Then he went down, long and awkward looking, but in his determination, as agile as the spider he was going to imitate. He went quickly out of sight. It left me empty and afraid. The claustrophobia he should have felt clamped down on me.

When it faded I imagined him again, going down there, dry, lanky, tense but unafraid. As I know now he went to try and save a disaster that would have wiped out thousands. He knew he must try to link with the Thing far down in the hill before the forces of destruction moved in and were themselves destroyed. Now, of course, I know what disaster Man's error would have meant. At the time I barely understood it, or wanted to. I'd sooner, then, that Camm was wrong.

Minutes passed. The dry clanking little sounds of the ladders stopped, and then I heard nothing. I went near the funnel edge of the great hole and shouted. The sound went down, echoing, barking like a disappearing dog. There was some small sound in reply, chattering with echoes, but it was a long way down.

The sweat of dread and tension came on me. I went back up the track to the barn, my skin cold with damp.

I got in the barn.

The radio spoke:

"I've reached the lowest level they cut," Camm said. "Depth reading 295 fathoms. I shall be burning through

to the estimated position of the crevasse. Keep listening."

"Hold it! Burning? What with?"

"Laser beams. It's the only means. This is granite down here."

He said no more, but I heard movements in the speaker. He was using the old wartime pilot's trick of leaving his set on "Send" so he couldn't get any objections.

It was hot in the barn. The sun was brilliant at the open door, but I was clamped in a crevice with two thousand tons of rock on top of me, slowly crushing in on me in the darkness.

I called him twice, but he didn't answer, because he couldn't hear. At last his noises stopped, and I heard a kind of hissing roar fading, as if he was running back from the source of it. Then it got high-pitched, and there was a rumbling, then an uneasy quiet. His voice came through.

"Right. The way's open," he said.

He didn't even bother to receive me and see if I'd heard him. I waited awhile. There were sounds in the box but nothing recognisable.

Leila called on the phone from the house.

"There was a call for you from London. It asked for the professor first, then for you. Here's the number. I didn't say what you'd do."

I knew the number all right. It was Eddie Hersey of Columbia. I sold him a lot of stuff for U.S. consumption, what with being so near Plymouth, the Mayflower and all the rest of the old lost chain. I've known Eddie for some years, and when he gets no reply by phone he usually comes personally. Expense is no object. He gets a rebate for bulk helicopter trips, so much a hundred.

I rang his flat and got a machine answer, so it seemed he had gone already.

For all Camm's rush it seemed the publicity dogs would be too soon for him. His attempts to protect the

Thing in the hill would be beaten then.

I still believed in myself that whatever was in the hill was some kind of monster animal, because I still hadn't the capacity to imagine anything else. My mind hadn't been fed then.

At four-five Wednesday, Camm said: "I've found the crevasse. I'm going down now."

And that was all. Leila came in with a cup of tea.

"Heavens! What's the matter with you?!" she said.

"Heatstroke," I said.

"You'd better have a tranquilliser. You look shook to bits." She had done her face and looked brighter. "Thanks for the case. Did he say anything?"

"Just he'd send the rest on."

"What do you think I ought to do?"

"I don't know. It's your column."

She looked angry, then hurt.

The phone rang. She took it and handed it over to me. It was London—the *Standard* this time—wanting to know about Camm's new work.

"You should know what he's doing, John."

"Well, I'll tell you. He's building an enormous organ. He's using all the old mine chimneys for pipes and got ten after burner jets for blowing, and he reckons he can get a Lennon & McCartney number to Mars and scoop the market there."

"Bloody fool!" But the *Standard* laughed and it was in next morning. Not in the news columns.

"Why do you always make silly jokes when you're worried?" Leila said. "Where is your uncle?"

"Just walking. Why?"

"I don't know. There's a funny atmosphere here."

"What kind of funny?"

"I don't know. Tense. Sort of empties you. Waiting for something. Can you see what I mean?"

"No," I said.

She took my empty cup and hesitated.

"Some duty-bound neighbour called in and told Tom I left your place at six o'clock," she said. "I'd half a mind to tell him I was innocent because you were in bed with that bitch up on the hill."

"I know you're upset, Leila, but I'm not a fallback—" That was a hell of a thing to say, but I was frightened and angry and it just came out.

The phone went again. She took it. She listened a moment, then gave me the phone. It was Craike.

"What the hell's she doing up there?" he shouted. "I thought you said a rest for a while. If she can go up there she can come down here, or she can have the bag. I don't care which. I just want to know."

"It's very complicated. Now shut up and say what you want."

"The London agencies keep calling. Why don't you do something, or have you resigned the news business?"

"For God's sake, I'm getting a story now! What do you think I'm doing? Who called?"

He bit the names off. On top, Western Television wanted to know if they could bring up a truck to interview Camm for a magazine programme. It was getting too hot. I couldn't understand how it was spreading so fast, but it seemed to mean my light-bending yarn had been junked. Perhaps it wasn't strong enough for Camm's reputation. When Camm went into news, it was Big Bang stuff.

Sitting here on this hot Friday, I can see what I did wrong, and that was everything. I could have rung the papers and told them the truth. I could have said Camm was bringing back into the world the Man before Man became a Man. They would just have thought, "Monkeys," and gone back on the Duchess's divorce. It's so easy to see it now.

It's very quiet. I wish that bill would flap. It's like a part of me gone. Some kind of protection. Like the little

bit of blanket I used to cuddle to myself as a baby.

I keep thinking of the emptiness of this place, and sometimes the most I fear is that one day they'll all come back into it. Twenty miles round from this town there is nothing but me and the dog.

The Safe Area.

There might be rats and mice and things, but this morning, after the roar of everybody going, I heard a little sound in the new silence and I saw an army of rats go out along the road down by the river and the old grain warehouse there.

There must have been a couple of hundred, living in that place, defying the rodent officer, and when the big silence came, they scared and ran down and swam away in the river. Just as the birds have gone.

I wonder if these creatures understand better than we do. Or if we understand anything at all.

I went to make some tea and put the kettle on the plug. After a while I got to wondering what was the matter with it, but I hadn't switched it on. It made me sweat.

It was the fault of the bill not flapping. I can't concentrate unless I keep on typing. The minute I stop I listen for the flap, but it won't come.

About noon the dog went out. I didn't bother for a while, but then suddenly I got into a panic he'd gone and left me alone. I ran down and tripped on that bit of worn lino on the bottom step. I fell against the door and hurt my rib. It put me into a sort of panic, and I rushed out, but he was standing in the middle of the empty road, looking up towards the hill, his head stretched out and his tail curving up like a plume. He was pointing. There was nothing there. I went up to him and said, "What's the matter?" He just stayed like that.

Then slowly he turned and walked on tiptoe, his ears up, tail up, tense, his hackles up like a brush.

But nothing was there.

I towed him back to the door. He shook himself and relaxed.

I felt my heart was pumping the blood out of me and putting back a lot of water. We went up and up and up and onto the roof. It was dead quiet all around. The rotten teeth of the old engine houses stood up on the hill.

"What's the matter with you, you stupid bloody animal!"

I shouted at him, and my voice echoed and echoed, running away down the empty streets, like a laugh.

We went back downstairs and I made some tea.

The thing to do is keep on typing, try to remember, try to keep the mind on some kind of rail.

But I wish that bloody thing would flap, flap, flap, flap.

Wednesday, about five-thirty. I don't remember exactly. So much seemed to be going into each few minutes I lost the gauge of the time.

In the barn I switched on the machines, and it emptied my stomach. I hated the guarded, greenish lights over the control boxes, the cabinets and the computers. It made them look like robots who might suddenly move.

I turned on a tape for something to do. Camm's voice started in midsentence.

"—but I doubt this. I believe that present man is an accident of retrogression, an inferior mutation, robbed of extraordinary senses but still retaining a desperate instinct of what has been lost.

"What I have been able to watch so far of the past world appears to agree. From signs and spectrum analysis and my new radio penetration I have a number of clues that seem to bear me out—"

I cut it off. It was eerie listening to a voice in that place. Nor did I find his ideas comforting. It was like being lectured by a ghost speaking of worlds to come. His voice sounding behind me shocked me violently.

"Difficult going, Johnny. You hearing me?"

I looked at the radio, then pulled myself together and replied.

"The depth shows 520 fathoms," he said. "The crack is barely enough for me with the harness on. I'm anxious in case its gets smaller."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm all right. Listen. Can you hear?"

I went close to the speaker. I could hear him breathing fairly hard. Then beyond that, I heard the sound, the soft double thump.

"You'd better come back!" I called out. It was almost as if I could feel the Thing coming up at him from the darkness below.

"Don't be a fool. Everything's going well, so long as this crevasse doesn't get any tighter. Keep listening."

I heard small metallic sounds and a faint whine as he went on down to the middle of hell.

I closed my eyes and sweated for the awful rock closing in, suffocating, piling millions of tons on top of me. And then it faded into a floating sensation, and weird electric excitement filled me like a wave. I turned round. Up in the darkness of the vast roof a great ball of luminous gas began to form. Gradually the middle of it filled with clouds of colour, shifting in the transparent globe, and then the surface of the thing began to fill in in all its terrifying detail.

I turned to run, choking with terror as the night before, but I clutched the back of the desk chair and stopped. My face was cold with sweat. I wiped it with my hand and then turned and looked up at the globe again. It was monstrous, but it was wonderful. Fear slipped back before the realisation of the fact that this was a living thing a thousand million years old. Time had been almost completely destroyed.

"Are you watching?" Camm's voice barked from the desk.

"Yes."

"The camera?"

"Can't see anything in the hayloft."

"Keep looking. It should come."

"How far are you down?"

"Five hundred ninety-eight fathoms. It's very tight. No traces of gas."

A great cube of dirty glass began to form in the shadows of the hayloft. It was about ten feet on the edge, a magic ice block coming solid from nothing. It formed inside as the globe had done, clouds of floating colour, drifting and then gradually crystallising and forming shapes.

When it formed fully I looked down upon a countryside from a height I judged about fifty thousand feet. It was strange and wild, yet recognisable. There were great trees and green vegetation, great bursts of colour from wild flowers. Huge pillars of rock broke up from the greenness, reddish-brown sores. Some rock piles lay in tumbled masses thousands of feet high, forming natural dams to a great lake to the north. I saw huge animals in that water, almost familiar animals from the picture books of youth.

The experience was nowhere near as bad as the first time, but there was a tightness in my brain as if some electric device were clamped round my head. The excitement which Camm had described was strongly there.

I took hold of the zoom control on the camera, and hesitated, as if it could be the switch to some Last Bomb. Then I turned it the way he had said to go lower.

The sensation was horrifying. I and the whole barnful of electronic monsters seemed suddenly to swoop downwards through space, tilting, speeding down. I remember covering my eyes so as not to see the final crash. When I took my hands away the camera was still about ten thousand feet above the strange country. I could see some small brown men by a river, squatting, just visible beyond the tops of vast trees.

The size of the trees jerked me into realising that they were probably fifty times bigger than anything we knew. My watching height then was much, much more than I had guessed. It was probably watching from a standoff point, eighty miles out.

Then beyond the fringe of the eastern forest I saw a shadow as of something standing on the edge of the tree belt. The trees threw black shadows, but this was a shapeless grey, like a jellyfish in clear water. Then suddenly the shadow swelled. It swelled so fast it seemed to burst and fill the whole scene with a sudden blaze of light, and in the middle of it was what seemed like a huge single eye, coming right into the barn at me.

The camera exploded. The luminous cube shrank like a bursting balloon and died into a single brilliant light spot hung in nothing. It was all I could see through the blazing blodges of colour and light that made sunsets in my sight.

There was a scream.

Camm shouted from the radio: "What's happened? For God's sake! I felt it! What's happened?"

"The camera burst. I think it's burning."

"Zero everything!" he shouted. "I'm coming up!"

There was no time to wonder why he had suddenly changed his mind when so far down. I didn't know about his back, then, and I was afraid of a major explosion. The single switch stopped everything humming, the globe faded to nothing in the black air.

I stood there listening to my heart and then heard a woman sobbing. I went to the doors. Peggy Pensilva was there, staring into the place where the cube had been, tears of sheer terror lining her cheeks. She pressed herself back against the barn wall by the door, as if trying to press herself right through to freedom.

"It was an eye!" she said. "It was an eye!"

She resisted for a moment when I grabbed her arm to push her out into the fresh air, then she let go. She

reeled, and I almost lost her when we got onto the lawn.

"It was an eye!" she said stupidly.

"It was the camera bursting."

"It was an eye."

It was hard to tell whether she was tight or scared into stupidity or both. I guessed at both and led her towards the house.

"You want a rest," I said.

She resisted. "Where's Camm? I came for Camm!"

"He's away today."

"I heard him talk in there."

"That was a tape."

Leila came out of the house, looking glass-eyed and hard.

"Mrs. Pensilva has had a shock. There was an explosion in the barn. She needs a rest. Look after her, will you, Leila?"

"Is it safe? Do you want the brigade?" Leila was always practical about anyone's affairs but her own.

"No. It's all right, I think. Just see to Mrs. Pensilva. I'll go back and make sure."

I went to go, and Peggy said, almost wonderingly: "It was an eye. It blew the camera."

As I walked away across the lawn I heard her saying it again in my mind, and I argued against it, knowing it was true. If there had been a creature and an eye, then it must have been millions of years old. They don't blow cameras.

But what about cameras linked to machines that have destroyed time? If time had gone, then the million-year eye could meet the camera and blow it.

I wiped my face and went into the barn. Camm was calling again.

"Coming up slowly, Johnny. You hear me?"

I switched to send and told him I did.

"Very, very slowly," he said, and seemed to be breath-

less. "Strange atmosphere. Hot as hell's breath. I feel my legs have gone to lead."

His motors whined as he climbed back up his spider's line.

"You're all right, are you?"

He was switching properly now, for he said: "Yes."

"I must go back to the house a minute. I'll call you when I get back."

He said, "All right." I went back to the house. I was worried about Peggy now. I didn't know how much she had seen, but it had been enough to stir up all the gin in her. She couldn't have come to the farm as tight as she had been when she staggered out of the barn. She was a hard drinker, I knew that, but she hadn't been tight last night. Perhaps she had bouts. She'd asked for a drink at 4 A.M. Yes, she could be a one-week-on, four-weeks-off woman.

But whatever her state had been, she had seen something and she would remember it. Yet what to do? To press her about it was to give away what it might be worth. To take no notice might help to persuade her there was really nothing there beyond experimental TV.

I stopped in my tracks, hesitating both ways. Leila came out of the house again.

"I put her on a bed," she said. "She's not well. I gave her some pills."

"She'll live," I said, and then to prepare a defence against what Peggy would say: "She's plastered."

"That business about the eye?" Leila looked rather sharp.

"A pink elephant eye," I said. "They jazz around come Michaelmas."

Then I remembered how she had asked why I always tried to joke when I was worried, and regretted the stupid touch.

"Parsons wants to see the professor."

"I'll see him."

"In the drawing room."

I went off to the house. Parsons was a favourite enemy from the Council offices. But I was glad he was there. He was someone I could push in the nose and know what I was doing. Nothing else around me was like that. When I tried to push anything in Camm's world in the nose my hand went right through and took my stomach with it.

Parsons was straight, thin, high-voiced. He said about understanding some equipment had been installed in the private premises contrary to the Rating Act, Section Something, 1966.

I said: "Who told you there was machinery here?"

He hesitated. He often acted on information received. Only this time the information was going to kill him stone dead, and he stood there snuling as if he didn't know it.

"I am afraid I am not allowed to divulge the source—"

"Mrs. Pensilva?"

He stopped short and gobbled so his apple slid up and down as if he would be sick. Then he was calm again.

"Nobody but she would think any work was going on up here," I said. "Camm has retired. Mrs. Pensilva was mad because she thought something was going on here but couldn't find out what."

"All she did was to ask me if permission had been granted for the installation of ."

I cut in: "Well, I'm sorry you're disappointed."

"Your uncle is out?" he said.

"He's exploring on the moor," I said, forestalling a question. "He goes for hours."

"Thank you," Parsons said, and fiddled with his black hat in one hand as he kept his small leather case of papers tucked tightly under his left arm. "While I am here, I have instructions to look at the protecting wall round the Wheal Silva shaft. Information says it is crumbling and could be dangerous to children."

I went cold as deep as my shoes.

"Now?" I said.

"While I am here. I know the way. I have walked up the valley often. Thank you, Mr. Newton. Good afternoon."

He just went out, because I had no excuse I could think of to stop him. He was right about that wall too. It was in a poor state of repair, and the councils all over Cornwall were getting edgy about these old mine shafts.

I ran back to the barn on a hunch. Camm was calling.

"Johnny! I'm hurt. In the crevasse. Near the top. About a hundred feet below the lowest level. The climbing motor's jammed. I think I've broken a leg—or some bloody thing."

"Can you stay there? You won't fall?"

"No. I'm jammed in the crack."

"Leave your bleeper going in case. I'll get the fire brigade."

I rang fire: The fire brigade is the answer in these parts. They have ropes, jacks, winches, and they're the go-anywhere do-anything boys. If anyone falls in a mine shaft, even a dog, it's the fire boys who come out and do the job. There's nobody like them. There's nobody else.

When I put the phone down and ran out into the garden I heard on the distant summer air the wailing of the sirens calling the fire boys together. It reminded me of war.

I saw Parsons walking back up the track from the shaft. He heard the sirens wail, for he stopped, turned round and looked down the valley towards St. Cary.

I ran to the open window of the room where Leila was working.

"Camm's hurt, down Wheal Silva," I shouted. "The brigade's coming. Hang on by the phone."

I went away towards the cart track down to the mine. I felt sick with anxiety, and with fear of being lost down

there, jammed in a crack with two thousand feet of rock on top, squeezing out the air all round me.

As I went I realised that calling the brigade had been part of a coward's twist. Anything to avoid even the idea of going down that awful place myself.

The thought sickens me even now as I sit here in the hot silence. The bill doesn't flap any more. The breeze seems to have gone altogether now, and the heat is still. The phone rang twice, and nobody was on the end.

The second time I must have been doing my nut with rage, for when I listened I got a feeling my brain was swelling up inside my skull, being puffed up like a crinkled balloon with hot, soft air. I slammed down, but the feeling was slow to ease off.

When it had I ran up the stairs onto the roof and watched the hill with the glasses. Nothing. The dog came up with me, but he kept sniffing the air over the edge of the roof, and it gave me vertigo. I yelled him to come back from it, but he didn't move till I went down again. Then he followed.

Back in the office I rang the control. Barker answered. I asked if anybody had rung me. He said no, what's the matter? Was I all right?

I'm all right. Just going off my nut, that's all. The cork's loose. Sometimes I rock out over the edge and feel happy at the idea of falling, then I rock back and I'm sane and try to get my foot under the rockers to stop going forward again. Only you can't get your foot under a feeling.

The dog's eating a biscuit. I'm out of smoke.

There are two thousand packets down in the pub. All mine.

The electric clock started to grunt. Last time it did that it jammed up solid. That was in March. I don't want it to stop now. I don't want anything to stop. It's like a bit more of life stopping too.

It must have been about six-fifty, Wednesday evening, when I got to the shaft wall. The only sound from down the horrid mouth was the whining of the pumps. I shouted, and my voice racketed away down to the middle of the earth, echoing fainter and fainter.

Parsons watched me from a few yards off. He waited till my shout died away.

"What's the matter?" he said, his voice high with sudden fear.

"Camm's hurt, down the shaft."

"How did he get down there?"

"He tripped on a tractor and fell down it."

He sewed his mouth up in a razor cut.

"He had no right to go down there, risking the lives of others who have to rescue—"

I bent to the shaft and shouted again.

Down the valley I saw the fire engine come under the old stone rail bridge. It was rocking on the cart track but making speed.

One of the white St. Cary police cars came in behind it, and after that, a small ambulance. Counting afterwards we know there were eight firemen, two policemen and two ambulance attendants; the round dozen, and with Parsons, thirteen.

I don't count myself.

On the down side of the shaft there is a broad sweep of open space, dotted with bits of stone from the old whim bases, and bearings for the balance bobs. They are scattered amongst bushes. The vehicles came into this area, the fire engine foremost, and pulled up, facing the shaft. All the crews got out.

The captain of the fire brigade was in charge.

"Fifteen hundred feet plus," he said, and pushed his helmet back, showing a sweat-shiny face. "That's a hell of a way down. Use the nylon ladder. She'll just about do it."

This ladder was two lines of nylon with aluminium

steps in between, rolled on a drum operated by the truck engine. It was a special piece of equipment used by the fire boys in getting up children, dogs and dead bodies from unprotected mine shafts.

Two firemen climbed the low wall and took the ladder end to feed it down the shaft. The driver remained in his seat and started the engine to roll the ladder drum. Another stood by to see it unrolled with no snags. The others, the police and the ambulance men, stood by.

I knew them all. I had scribed their exploits.

The motor wound the drum. The two men by the shaft mouth fed the ladder down. Now and again I shouted down and got my echo.

The captain shouted to the waiting men to get the climbing equipment, lamps, ropes and a folding alloy stretcher used for dragging the injured up the vertical.

I said: "You can follow the web to find him." I told him about Camm's apparatus.

I was sweating, not so much with the heat of the still evening as with the periodic qualms of sick fear that kept sweeping my claustrophobic soul.

"She's bottomed!" one of the firemen shouted, and pointed down the shaft.

The drum was almost empty of ladder. The driver stopped the engine, and a queer silence fell on the whole lot of us.

Then everyone stood still, as if surprised or listening for something. It was weird, like a film suddenly stopped in mid-frame; action, sound, the lot.

I remember, in those paralysed moments, feeling a soft warmth, an excitement, the sort of sudden elation one feels with happiness. It was a sensory invasion. I didn't feel it physically. It was a kind of mental excitement that rose up away from the darkness of fear. Then my head clanged with sudden pain.

The men stood silent, still, all round me, some in mid-

attitude, a hand raised, a head cocked. And then they began to fall.

When movement came back, their knees began to sag. Some reached for their heads, some just knelt, opened-eyed, sagging-mouthed, as if seeing the devil in the sky. No one spoke. No one made a sound except by the grunting of his knees and boots as he crumpled and fell and lay still on the dry ground.

The only man to cry out was Parsons. He reeled backwards, his bony hands clawing his face.

"It's God! It's *God!*" He screamed it out, then fell into the dry grass, rolled over onto his back and groaned with his last breath.

I stood there, no sense of horror in me. I knew those men were dead. I knew they were dead, but it meant nothing to me. I had no feeling for them. All I felt was relief as the pain in my head stopped.

I took a lamp from one of the dead firemen, climbed the low wall, got a grip on the ladder and went down the shaft.

The sweat is on me as I remember the sickness of fear, of being buried alive in the darkness and heat, of being slowly crushed to death between the thousand-ton rocks—it sickens me now. I can feel the cracking of my bones being crushed, the desperate panic of trying to shout, but the pressure of the rocks on my chest choking the breath out so that I can do nothing but be squeezed to death. To die pinned down, in terror until my brain bursts with panicked despair.

Yet on Wednesday evening I went down into the black belly of the mine, into the heat and mouldy stench of lost men, with no thought in my head but to get Camm and stop anyone else from coming down the shaft.

Looking back in a sane way, I should say I was mad, pushed over the edge by the sudden horror of the men struck dead in silence and without a single mark or sign of violence.

It was a long, long way down past the old rotting timbers of the workings. At the bottom I looked up to the pin of daylight as high above me as heaven, and only then did I feel the dizzy fear of a terrible height. It was a fear of being unable to grasp it mentally, not just vertigo.

I found the break-through in the rock Camm had cut. The nylon thread led me on into a great fissure, narrow as a closing vice. I remember my heart faltered and I drew back.

Camm shouted. His voice was weird and echoing in the lost world there. He had seen my light.

He was jammed down the crack about forty feet, his pale face turned upwards.

"It's me—Johnny," I said.

It was stinking hot down there, and the sweat ran into my eyes.

"Thank God," he said. "The motor jammed on the line."

Looking down at him increased the fear of being slowly crushed to death in that awful place.

"Will it hold the line?"

"It's locked on. It can't fall back."

"I'm going to pull the rope," I said. "I don't know what you've broken, but this will hurt."

"Just get me up," he said. "I can't feel anything below my belly, my legs aren't trapped."

"It'll hurt."

"Do it."

I backed into the mine working again. There was a lot of old timber lying about, left where it had fallen.

The fireman's axe chopped the nylon web line after two swipes. I got the cut end lashed round a foot-square beam about two feet from the broken end, which I jammed against the rock wall. That gave me a lever. I put my back against the wall and shoved the beam with my feet. It resisted a few seconds, then began to give. I saw the nylon line getting thin as it strained.

"All right!" Camm's voice echoed, "All right all right all right," in every crack in the place. "I'm moving, moving moving moving . . ."

I jammed the beam where it was with more wood, got a new stance and shoved from there.

"Keep on! I'm coming up!"

It was slow. I had to keep jamming the beam so it wouldn't let him fall back. If he did fall, he might not be able to wedge himself again, and go down thousands of feet in the crevasse. The thought of that made the strain worse, and the sweat kept blinding me.

I was returning to normal. Fears started to pour in on me as to a child in the dark. I began to fear the great, ambling shadow of a terrifying monster coming out of the labyrinth of tunnels at me, slopping in the water, laughing with teeth like a giant crocodile.

Sweat got in my eyes all the time then, so I could hardly see. The light of the lamp became a dazzling curtain of glass and rainbow bursts.

I kept shouting: "Hang on! Hang on!" More so that my own voice might frighten off the approaching monster than to encourage Camm.

No more wood could be jammed. The last lot reached the wall. I pawed the tears out of my eyes, took up the lamp and went through the laser hole. It was as hot as hell, burning the skin even under my clothes.

The crack opened up to the light. I saw Camm, a pale face and a pair of clawing hands, only a couple of feet below me. I put the lamp down, laid on the rock and just hauled him up, hand to hand.

When I rolled him on top of me like a sack he panted: "Bloody back's gone. Can't feel my legs."

It wasn't easy to get him into the shaft with that mass of muck on his back, but I left him strapped to it. It acted like a splint in case his back had broken, and that was all I thought about then. I didn't know many reasons for legs going dead.

He was half out and breathing hard.

"I'm going to tie you on my back," I said.

He tried to resist. "Isn't there any help?"

"I don't know what happened. They were struck dead. A dozen of 'em up there."

"Oh Christ! It did happen then!" He shut his eyes. His face was as wet as if I'd thrown a bucket of water at it.

Fear of the Beast came over me again. I thought I could hear the great mass of it rumbling in the massive climb up the crevasse. In a minute it would be there. Hurry!

He panted: "I tried to stop —" Then he flopped again.

"Is there any pain?"

"No. I can't feel—"

I chopped some lengths of the spun line and got a sling round him I could hoist over my shoulders. I was shivering with haste, fumbling like a fool. There was a question I burst to ask, and couldn't face the answer.

At last it came up through: "Did you see it?"

He shook his head, opened his eyes a moment.

"Did it do this to you?"

"I don't know. No. It came from above. The light. I was blinded. It screamed with no sound. I was hanging there—then you said—the camera burnt—I was blind then. When I could see—I tried —tried to get up— My legs—"

"Relax."

He was practically out. I got him on my back. I could feel his legs dangling against mine like a doll's. I doubted the wisdom of dragging him up there, but I couldn't leave him down, after the men upstairs had gone dead. The alloy frame would hold his spine straight anyway.

I swayed around a good deal, getting the balance of the two of us, then I stood the lamp so it shone up the shaft and started to go up the beam.

There had once been a man engine working in that shaft, which meant the miners had step-off places every

ten feet up. I used every one. Camm was heavier than I thought. Halfway I got so that I felt I would give in. I was near crying with exhaustion and strain. My muscles were going flaccid from sheer weakness, and I was frightened all the time I wouldn't be able to hold the ladder.

After that near breakdown, it got easier somehow. Or perhaps I'd gone past the point of feeling anything, even the pain of exhausted muscles.

Camm passed out somewhere on the way up.

There was no daylight at the top to let me see how far there was to go, only stars. And then, almost at the last stretch, there was light, blazing, brilliant white light, flaring across the mouth of the shaft.

We got to the top. I went to the wall to clamber over it with my great burden, as if something drove me on in case, if I stopped, I should just fall back down the mine.

At the wall my knees gave, and I clutched the stones with my arms hooked over them, clutching at safety too long denied.

The glaring light was switched off me. I saw it swing away over the valley floor. There were lights everywhere, headlights, a couple of searchlights lighting up the floor of the valley where the old trains had run.

I made out cars and trucks. I heard shouts as they saw us.

On my left the fire engine, ambulance and police car still stood, looking blindly towards me. The dead men were still lying around as they had fallen.

"It's all right!" I shouted. "There's no danger. No danger!"

They must have come up the slope to Wheal Silva after that, but I didn't see them. They said I was dead out when they got to me, but I was still clutching the wall and they had a job to make me let go.

V

They were trying to shove me into an ambulance. It seems I came to physically and started going round in circles and falling over, blind as a bat. I was more than that. I wasn't conscious. When I came to and found myself at the ambulance door I was fighting two men. When I stopped struggling they pinned me against the backfolded doors as if scared I would start again. Then they realised that something had changed and let me go.

"Hop in, Johnny," one man said, panting.

"No," I said. I saw the other vehicles standing around and the engine house rearing into the night sky, headlights painting it silver. "Where's Camm?"

"Taken him down in the other one. Looks like a broken back. Can't be sure till the doc has a look on the table."

They looked at me as at a sleepwalker.

I said: "How soon will they know?"

"Not yet. They'll have to check everything. Better hop in."

The panic of leaving that place to the searchers swept me. At all costs it had to be defended.

"I'm all right," I said, and went away back towards the shaft.

There was a lot of confused activity, but all the photos had been taken and the bodies removed. Half a dozen police were there.

I went to the chief constable.

"Can I have a line to the hospital on one of your cars?"

"Sure. Any one. But you'll be waiting. They filled him with morphia. It could take some time to find out what's wrong."

I watched a couple of policemen looking over the guard wall of the shaft. Barker pushed his cap back on his head, and I saw the whites of his eyes as he looked skew-wise at me.

"What happened?" he said.

There was the question. I was completely bewildered by the affair. My going down the mine for Camm might have been a direct reaction to not wanting to face what had happened around me.

At that time I remember feeling everything was unreal. The sort of dreamlike state that comes with shock after an accident.

"What happened to them?" Barker said, rather quietly.

I tried to think. Fighting at the back of my mind was the fear that, whatever happened now, I mustn't say anything about the animal down there. What had happened already would make sure that if they got on to it, they'd kill it.

Inexplicably, it was desperately important to me that they should not make any attack. It felt as if my own life would go if they did.

He said: "You were there too?"

I said: "They just fell down dead."

"All at once?"

"All at once."

Barker and his men listened like idiots.

"But *you* didn't!" Barker said.

I almost answered that one, but I was not that far gone that I couldn't think at all, as they seemed to be.

"There was no explosion? No gas? No electricity? No shots?"

"There was nothing at all. They just fell down dead. I saw nothing, heard nothing, smelt nothing, felt nothing. They just died."

"There was nothing down the shaft? No poisonous fumes?"

"I was a long time down there. I'd have been dead, wouldn't I?"

They were lost, like kids, and I let them be lost. I didn't know anything myself that could have helped them. All I could do was point to a target for fear. The idea of doing that locked my jaws solid.

At that time, after midnight, Thursday morning, they were looking around for recognisable signs of something that could kill and leave a mark. At 1 A.M., Fatty got the king-size fancy, that brought me an odd relief.

"Your uncle is a scientist," he said. "Is it possible he invented some kind of death ray?"

"If he has, I don't know of it, and if he has, why didn't it kill me too? I was in the middle of them."

He said: "For Christ's sake, it's got to be something!"

There was a silence all round us. Some distance away a couple of shirt-sleeved coppers chatted in soft, scary voices. When a routine call came out of one of the cars, rasping like a scratched can, it shot us all stiff for a moment.

Barker said: "Let's go back up there and look."

He pointed up to the farm, twinkle-windowed like a fairy cottage against the black slope. It all felt fairylike to me then. Unreal, tense, impossible.

I said: "Okay. Better to be up there than down here. I wouldn't keep men down here till I knew what the hell did it."

He said: "Was it from here? Or was it from up there?"

A sergeant said: "Mrs. Pensilva was up there. She didn't get hit."

Something struck me then. I said: "Was Mrs. James all right?"

The sergeant said: "She went just before, Mrs. Pensilva said. Her husband came for her."

I felt relieved and angry Tom had come. But at least he had got her out of it. I couldn't understand the sudden uprush of anxiety for her unless it was a stirring of old feeling shaken up by the shocks of the night.

We started to walk up to the farm. Barker told the sergeant to get the men higher up the valley. The lights of a couple of cars showed on the road above the farm. They switched round and turned into the head of the valley.

"Defence Intelligence," Barker said sourly. "Why don't they leave us alone? We can sort it out. We know our own districts. You never get anywhere now. Even right at the top you find some God or other. Sometimes I think it isn't worth the climb."

He, too, was trying to get his emotions wrapped round some normal, familiar thing.

"What in hell could it be? Why didn't you die?" He almost snarled and wiped his shiny face.

We stopped. I don't know why. There was silence behind us, and because of what had happened, I turned to look at the police standing round against the pale of their own lights. Nobody moved. There was something of that same sensation of uneasy thrill that I had felt at the mine shaft.

I looked back up the valley to the house. It was silhouetted against the white glare of the downcoming cars, its surrounding trees like lace against the whiteness.

Then the glare faded, blasted out by a light such as I had never seen before. It was no kind of light I knew, but a quickly growing glow, like a silent explosion of vast power building up into a light brighter than the sun. It centered over the great barn, then swelled until I had to shut my eyes. Barker gave a cry.

"My God! I'm blinded!" he shouted.

With my eyelids shut the brilliance of the light burnt through them, making a screen of bright pink. Then it faded slowly back to black.

When I opened my eyes there were great blobs of colour on my sight, but gradually through the distortion I made out the scene on the hillside. Everything was the same, the house, the trees, the barn, silhouetted against the car lights.

Only the lights themselves had stopped, crash-stopped by blinded drivers.

Barker was standing, holding his hands across his face.

"It's all right!" I said. "Nothing's happened. Are you hurt?"

Tears were streaming down his face when he took his hands away. He blinked, he blurred, he wiped his eyes.

"No," he grunted. "I can see. What in God's name was that?"

"I don't know. It was over the barn."

"Let's get up there. Give me a hand. I'm half blinded."

We went together up the rocky path. When we came into the garden a couple of men came running down the drive from the other side of the house, shouting something, the coattails flying, the car lights picking them out like paper figures.

We all ran towards the barn, me right ahead. I knew the trouble was in there, but nothing showed. No smoke, no glow, no sign of fire. As I ran in through the door the lights were on still. There was a heavy hot smell of metal, rubber, plastic and scorched wood.

I stood there, looking down the aisle of the electric machines. They were not as they had been. The metal fronts were burned with scorch marks, some had buckled, three or four of the cases had just burst open and the electronic entrails were just spilled out like a disemboweled man. The control console had burst at one

end and lurched as if it had been lifted up to the roof height and just dropped.

I walked around the wreck of Camm's work. The machines were burst, burnt out, shattered. The aerials up in the great middle of the barn had melted and hung down like dead flowers. It was as if some gigantic electric force had just burst through everything, exploding the feeble circuits by the sheer fury of its charge.

It was almost like Camm himself being gone, kicked out into limbo with his ideas thrown after him like rubbish nobody wanted.

They walked round, looking solemn, staring at the ruins of the electric robots. They were lost. Barker stayed with me, watching them. At last they came back towards us.

"Lock the place up," one said, and we all went out into the silent night.

The silence was strange, for there were quite a few men dotted around the valley and in the grounds. It was quiet as at a funeral. Nobody liked to say much.

Except the Defence men. I knew it was coming even before it started. The fact they didn't start right away screwed me up until I thought I'd start instead.

Defence said: "What was Camm working on?"

I said: "Light jumping."

"What's that?"

I said it was multiplying light by radio frequency and getting the leapfrog effect.

Defence said: "Couldn't that sort of frequency have a radiation effect?"

"Why ask me? I'm a pulp basher."

"Couldn't it?"

"Camm didn't say so."

"He told you everything?"

"He told me things. He knew I couldn't understand much."

"You've seen this work? This stuff in here?"

Peggy had been with me. She knew. "Yes."

I described the world of millions of years ago. They just looked at me.

"Did you feel any radiation effects?"

"No."

"You don't sound very certain."

"How can you be certain about a thing like that? It comes out afterwards, doesn't it? I only saw this bloody lot last night."

"He explained it to you?"

"In words of the Children's Newspaper."

"What was he doing in the mine shaft?"

"Testing transmissions."

"From the barn?"

"Yes."

"You sure of that?"

"That's what he said."

"You're lying."

"That's what he said. I don't know what he did."

"Could he have been preparing for an underground test? Nuclear?"

"He wasn't a chemist."

"Could he?"

"No."

"Then what was he doing down there?"

"Testing transmissions."

Barker said: "Answer the questions, Johnny. What's the matter? Do you know something?"

"I only know what I'm saying. What else?"

"Why are you so shaky answering?"

"Thirteen men fell dead all round me. I'm shaky."

They waited a bit, looking round. One Defender went off and spoke low with some others of his staff nearby. We were all standing out on the dark lawns with the lights from the uncurtained house windows streaming across in radiating paths.

The Defender came back.

He said: "You saw the blaze of the barn?"

I said: "I saw a lot of light."

"It looks like an electricity burn-up in there. Did Camm ever say it was unstable?"

"No."

"You feel anything when it went off?"

"A sensation. Thundery style."

Barker said: "It near blew the inside of my head out."

Defence said: "You just felt a sensation?"

I said: "What did you get?"

Defence said: "Like the chief constable."

I said: "You may be oversensitive."

"You could be used to the radiation frequency."

"Like an alcoholic?"

Barker said: "Don't stir it, Johnny."

He was worried for me. He seemed to know if I went across the Defence men they might do something to me he couldn't stop. Nobody knows who's Boss these days. You have to wait to see which man hides the chopper. I felt very uneasy then. I was playing against them and couldn't make out why. It was as if I had something to hide personally.

They left me for a while and discussed the possibility of water permeating the electric cables and boosting the 66,000-volt main line in by five or six times. They thought of a sudden release of foul gas by Camm's pumping out the mine. Then there could have been a wave of radiation from the shaft, granite being a heavy holder of radioactivity and the whole area being a granite island.

That's when I could see they began to hate me. I killed every theory by being alive myself. They kept smashing in questions at me as if my crime were staying alive.

What did you feel? Why didn't you fall? Why didn't you feel anything? What shoes did you have? Is yours a silk shirt? Were you hopped up? No, no, no, no, no, no.

"You boys don't get it!" I shouted at the end. "I'm the

murderer. I must be. Read your Agatha Christie! The hell with you. I'm going to have a drink."

I turned towards the house.

Defense said: "Wasn't there anything—anything at all that was unusual?"

I said: "You asked me that for Christ's sakes how many times already. If I did I would say. There was nothing but the men fell down and Parsons shouted out, 'It's God!'"

"God? Why did he say that?"

"As he was dead next minute I never got round to the answer."

"I mean, you knew him. Was he religious? Would God have come into his mind at the last minute?"

"Parsons didn't go to church after a row over choir boys. That was three years ago. No. The way he said it was almost as if he was seeing something. There was nothing to see."

"The ladder down the shaft was nylon and alloy. That couldn't conduct."

Away in the distance a police radio was barking. It was coming up to dawn. I just walked away from the inquisition and into the house. I was going to have a drink but made some tea instead. I needed the heat inside me. My stomach was empty and acid. I wished Leila hadn't gone.

Barker came in. He was glad of a cup, but it made him look fatter, hotter than ever.

"What happened to Peggy Pensilva?" I said.

"We took her home. I think she had shock. Kept on saying something about an eye. Do you know what she was talking about?"

"I don't know what anybody's talking about."

He sat down in a cartwheel chair. There was something almost peaceful in that big old stone kitchen.

"You must know —something," he said. "There must be something that registered. Or did the shock wipe the slate of your mind?"

"You're poetic. I never suspected. The answer is, how would I know?"

He chuckled and wiped his face. Something about his earthy helplessness made me soften towards him. He was better, more likeable, more pathetic when you suddenly saw he had somebody riding on top of him.

The Defense men came in.

Defence said: "We have a preliminary post-mortem report. No trace of violence. No obvious reason for death at all."

Barker said: "No gas trace? Electricity burns?"

"Nothing at all. They look so peaceful the doctors say they almost look pleased to be dead."

I said: "Where's the damage, then? There must be some."

"They can't find any."

We talked awhile, and then it all swung back to the old death ray. But again, I blocked the guesswork. It was while we were discussing that kind of difficulty they shunted in a strange doctor from Plymouth. He gave me a check-up with some instruments I'd never seen before, not even in the Army hospitals.

He said: "You have a very slow pulse."

I said: "I don't mind that so long as it doesn't stop. What are you testing for?"

"Abnormality. There isn't any."

"You think I might be radioactive?"

"Some chassis can absorb a lot of poison or current beyond the point where anybody else would die."

"You can leave that out. I was poisoned in Kuala Lumpur with Chinese scotch and it nearly did me. Further I was electrocuted, come to think."

"When?"

"About eleven years ago. I got the wrong end of a cable I thought was dead and had wet shoes on. It took them an hour to unlock my jaws."

"Where was that?"

"Over in Sarawak."

"You were East a long time?"

"Six years. They have a lot of wars out there."

He went on pumping. Defence listened. Barker sat in his chair and drank tea.

It was a surprise to see light at the windows. It seemed to come suddenly, as if I had flipped back to Borneo during the inquisition.

"I want to know about Camm, soon as possible," I said.

Barker seemed relieved to go out and find out for me.

Defence said: "You must have some idea of what's wrong here."

I said: "I only know what's unusual here, and that's all burnt up in the barn."

"Why does the woman talk about an eye?"

"If you see a blazing flash of light, like over the barn, the immediate effort on my sight is to blast a black bit in the middle of the glare. That could be an eye to some."

"This was before the burn-up in the barn. She said you were there."

"That was what I said. A burn on the retina. The camera blew."

"She said something came up from the ground and it was an eye."

"She's hysterical."

"She didn't seem the type."

"Why do you want me to answer for her illusions? It isn't evidence."

"It could help."

Barker came back and said: "He's under sedation. They're going to move him to Plymouth in the morning."

I said: "What's the matter with him?"

"Something with his back, but they won't say. It isn't broken. The muscles or nerves or something have ceased working. He can't move below the waist."

Defence said: "Nerves. Any record of nervous trouble with your uncle, Mr. Newton?"

I said: "He never had nerves."

"Not even from the strain of his work?"

"You mean from the type of his work?"

"All right."

"From the type of his recent work?"

"Yes."

"He hadn't changed in five years. He worked too hard. If he felt rough, he stopped and went walking for days till he'd cleared his body and his mind. Then he worked again."

"You noticed no difference in him at all?"

"For Christ's sake! I keep telling you!"

Cigarettes were handed round. I made some more tea.

Defense said: "Let's get back to where everybody was at the shaft mouth."

We were back at the start again. Another weary circle. I couldn't stand the thought of it. I just burst.

"All right!" I shouted. "There's a prehistoric monster down the shaft who breathes up death rays instead of fire, and he'll blow the bloody daylights out of the rest of you, given time and any luck."

Defence said: "Just go back to where the ladder was let down . . ."

In Camm's study other Defence men were going through all the papers and notebooks and tapes. There was nothing there they could understand in a quick look like that. Scientists would have to spend a good time over it all, and even then, Camm had kept a lot in his head. It had always been one of his boasts, and one of the main sources of anxiety for his companions in science.

I knew there wouldn't be anything there about the Thing. And the heartbeat tape had been in the barn.

Barker said: "We want you to see him in the morning."

I said: "Not if the ward's bugged."

"Can't guarantee that. It's out of my hands."

"If I don't get a promise, I don't go."

Defence said: "Will you tell us what he says?"

I said, "Yes."

They watched me awhile, then Defence said: "Okay. There will be no one listening."

I didn't trust them. They didn't trust me. It was fair enough.

Through the window I could see down the valley to where some terrified, brave souls were searching the ground near Wheal Silva. They would find nothing. There was nothing to find. I felt then that nothing really had happened. It was just a dream I couldn't get out of.

I felt it again just now when I went down for the cigarettes. It was hot and still, the sun shining. The emptiness of the world was frightening. On the pavement I stopped by the newsbill. Its torn flaps did not move.

The dog came with me into the pub. I just grabbed some cigarettes and went out again. A sense of terrible loneliness hit me then. It was fear of the empty street, the death of everything, the buildings just standing there, for nothing, for nobody. Nobody was coming any more. I shut my eyes.

And then it happened.

It was a sound, but it was a second or two before I realised that was what it was. At first it seemed like a great pressure in the air, stunning my eardrums, and then clarified into a shrieking, howling sound, an indescribable din rising up between the houses, ringing in the sky. The dog barked. I crouched down and got his head, not to quiet him, but for company in panic.

The sound seemed to crawl across the sweat on my face, it gathered its own discords from clattering lamps, drumming windows so that I couldn't make out what the hell it was for more than half a minute.

When I did realise what it was I felt no better, but madder than at any time during this day.

Every phone in St. Caryl was ringing. In every house, every office, every shop, every box—thousands of shrill bells drummed up a mass sound like of which I never heard even in the nightmare sound tracks of terror films.

When it died, it faded, drawing away into the sky, leaving the empty buildings moaning with the last echoes of the ghastly attack.

I didn't get off my knees for a long time after the empty open windows of the town were still again.

I didn't ring headquarters. I didn't want them to know.

VI

Six-fifteen Thursday morning they let me go home to clean up. I felt I'd had my insides taken out, pressure-hosed and put back wrong way round. They'd pummelled me with questions, but they hadn't got anywhere, because I didn't know what the deaths were about then. I felt it had to do with the Mute, but I couldn't tell Camm and I were still alive. That was why I couldn't tell.

Leila was there again. I felt a choking warmth when I saw her. There were a lot of things bubbling up to say, a flood of feeling to let go, like crying on Mama's bosom.

I said, "Don't go to Camm's. There's been an accident. Defence has taken over."

"Is he all right?"

"He's in Janet's. Nothing serious."

I went to the door to get a bath but felt a hurt and turned back.

"Why the hell did you come again?"

"He's gone mad. He came last night. I went with him to stop his yelling in front of other people. Then he pretended a black-out when he got in the car."

"Did you feel anything when he got that?"

"I had a pressure headache as soon as he started kicking

up. It just got worse. He came to and drove like a lunatic to frighten me. He kept saying things, foul things all the time. He's gone mad—Oh, Johnny!”

Then she grabbed me and cried on my shoulder. I couldn't do anything for a minute, then I pushed her away.

“I've got to bathe. See Camm.” I turned away from her, not to see what she looked like then. “Talk there.”

In the bathroom I left the door open. She didn't follow. The sun was very bright. I felt weak, dizzy, somehow sick. I sat on the edge of the bath and ran the shaver round my chin. The queer drifting of my mind out of my head was on again. The buzz of the shaver faded right away.

Wind-up ran through my body, and I turned on the bath water, just to have hold of something hard. Then I couldn't let go of the taps and leant on them, frightened I would fall right down and down and drift endlessly amongst the stars.

The hot tap started to burn my hand, and the feeling shot through me, half bringing things into a nightmare reality. I felt the top of my head was sliced off, coconut-wise, and my horrid, wormlike mass of brain was coming out like froth. A sickness flooded me. I let go of the taps and fell in the bath. At last my natural warning system of pain jerked my nerves together like bits of iron being clamped. I hauled myself up and then felt her pulling as well.

“Johnny! What's the matter?”

“It wanted to get me to the mine!” I shouted at her and vomited out a lot of water.

Half-dazed, I began to realise that if it hadn't been for the burn of the tap it would have got me there, as later, it did.

At seven-forty I got to the Janet White Memorial Hospital, up the end of the town. I'd been there a lot before

for births, deaths, accidents, illnesses and other news. This time it was strange, tense.

Defence was in the main corridor, watching me. Police were outside in a white car. They watched me too. Even Sister Carr looked at me strangely before she took me up to the private ward.

"I don't think he's fit to be visited," she said. "He's hardly out of sedation."

"I've just got to see him," I said.

A morning tea and breakfast trolley was pushed silently by. I almost fell back against it, my balance was so bad with the recurrent drifting feeling I kept getting.

She said: "Do you feel all right?"

"Let me see Camm."

She let me go in. He was just lying there with his eyes open. He looked as old as God. He groped for my hand as if he couldn't see properly, and when he had hold, something happened.

I couldn't tell then what it was, but it seemed that everything in the front of his mind flashed into mine, a great twisted hair ball of thoughts and information for which I had not the capacity of learning or experience to grasp. It just stayed in my mind, blocking it, suffocating it with that great ball.

We had always been telepathic in small matters, as many close people are, but this was a shattering transmission. If my brain had been normal then I could never have received it.

He let go my hand, half smiled and then closed his eyes. I thought he was dead. I ran out and called Sister Carr. She went in quickly but came out again after a minute.

"He's all right," she said, "as he can be. We can't tell at present what happened to him. Sir Gerald's flying down from London. The neurologist."

"Yes," I said.

Dr. Brown came up with a lot of forms clipped to a board.

"Next of kin, Johnny," he said. "Will you sign an okay if Sir Gerald thinks surgery is necessary?"

"I don't want him cut about," I said. "You know I believe in surgery as failure."

"But this would be search, not just cut."

We had talked about it before, he and I. He talked me round.

"Relation to patient," he said, scribbling in the form.

"Son," I said.

He looked up at me. The first hair of the ball came unstuck and lashed across my dulled mind like a whip. Suddenly I knew what my mother had always been thinking about, and Camm shrank into an ordinary man in my mind, and I wanted to blub.

Brown just wrote down and I signed it. When he went away Defence came up behind my shoulder.

"What did Camm say?"

"Nothing at all. He's not fit."

"We must know. There's no time. A helicopter just flew into the hill out there. All the crew dead before they hit."

I went hot and then iced all over. I said: "What time?"

"Six twenty-two."

"Describe it."

That was about when it was trying to get me to the shaft and I fell in the bath. I saw the connection, understood the groping for my mind, as Camm had done.

I said: "Camm's equipment blew up. He was here. How could he have done anything?"

"There's something. We're asking for Mind Reader permission."

"That bastard thing!"

"Camm supplied the brain for it."

"He didn't mean it to be used for that. He hated it always."

"We must act fast."

The Mind Reader was what it said; an electronic device clipped onto the human brain got the pulses of dreams and thoughts and secrets and translated the whole lot into readable tapes. All the good, the bad, the ambition, the filth, all was sucked out of a mind rendered defenceless. To keep the pretence of that non-existent state, Democracy, the highest authority had to give permission for its use.

In Camm's case, it would be given.

"How many men in the chopper?"

"Five. Makes eighteen dead now."

"Why did they fly over? Trying to get a clue you missed?"

"There must be *something!*"

"Any sign of what killed the men last night or this morning?"

"None."

I said: "Look in their brains."

I walked away, leaving them behind me. In the folded open glass door I saw the reflection of one of them turning and going quickly away back to the RMO's room.

I was going back to the office but suddenly got scared of going there with my head in the state it was then. When I saw the dog on the wall top I called him and we went off together into the Green Park and down to the river where nobody was. It was hot and peaceful and the colours were magnificent, rich and rainbowy as in a dream.

The dog sat by me, watching. I started talking to him, trying to unravel the ball Camm had shunted into my mind. I couldn't. What Camm had overestimated was my capacity for understanding his big intelligence. I hadn't got enough to cover. I felt I'd go really mad if I tried.

I remember shoving it back in my head and just trying to adjust myself to the scene around me, the rainbow water, the fish noses spotting it with rings, the skidding

insects, the dragonflies hovering like Martian aircraft in the sun. I remember the bursts of colour of the later flowers and the brown-edged blades of the sunburnt grass, and I remember feeling that this would be almost the last time that I should see it. As if instinct told me this world would explode, as the old one had done, and melt away into a mass of blazing gas drifting through the sea of watching stars awaiting their turn.

The drift continued, the colours faded, and there was the deep darkness of space all round me, and the stars were blobs I could reach out and touch. One was brighter than the rest, over my head, but it was not a star but a spot of light, and its light was sparkling on the granite walls of a well.

I was in the bottom of the shaft again, but it was day. The air was moving all round me, softly, like a big padded, black body moving in sleep.

Suddenly the darkness split, like an arrow of light flashing in my brain, and I was back by the river, head aching as if it burnt inside, the dog licking my face anxiously, sweat on me like a shower.

The dog was whimpering, his tail wagging, his eyes alight with excitement. When he saw me look back at him, he dropped down and lay on the grass, switching his tail.

"For God's sake, do *you* understand?" I said. "You? But not one soul in all this place could understand it. How in hell can *you*?"

We walked back. He was normal then, alert, quick, determined to miss nothing of the life that whirled aimlessly round him.

I checked the time, left the dog on the wall and went up into the office.

Craike was marching about, angry and lost.

"Where the hell have you been? Right fine talk in the town this morning. Everything from outer space invasion

up. No details. D stops everywhere. Not even telling me what it is I'm sitting on. What do you know?"

"Nothing," I said, and called the police station. Barker was on there, sounding hot and excitable. "Anything happen up the valley around nine-twenty?"

"Anybody on?"

"Me alone."

"Men collecting the chopper up there. Naval recovery unit. Seven men. All dead."

"Why don't you brains keep men off the area?" I said. "You know there's something wrong. What's the good of killing men to find out?"

"It's Defence." He breathed hard. "What do you know? Camm said nothing. They're getting a sort of detector machine down. How do they know it'll get the truth? People don't dream truth or think truth. Lot of bloody fairy stories, mostly. You can't live on truth. It's like living on boiled washing. . . . Are you going to be there?"

"Yes. Awhile anyhow."

"Leave a number. They'll want you again. Bowater's on his way."

"Okay," I said.

Bowater had been chief adviser to governments on every development of defence and attack for thirty years. He had worked with Camm. He thought the world of Camm. But he wasn't coming to worship Camm. He was coming to drain Camm.

Before Barker put down I said: "Mrs. Pensilva been in?"

"Yes. Why?"

"She's hysterical."

"About the eye? She swears it was. She's steamed up. Ginned up too."

"She say anything about me?"

He hesitated. "What kind?"

"Talking in my sleep."

"Yes."

"Hell, what did she say? It's not evidence till I say it."

"About you saying Camm was going to bring something up from the mine."

"Well, so he was."

"What?"

"Copper."

I heard him take a long breath. "Is that all?"

"He had ideas about reopening the mines up there. They were only abandoned because it was cheaper to get it where the niggers live. There's still plenty up there." I could almost feel his doubt. "The radio stuff he was working on could prospect for metal lodes without drilling or digging. It could actually see down."

"I didn't know that." Barker sounded relieved.

"The idea came to me that perhaps the rays penetrating down there could have stored up in the granite, radioactive-wise, and burst out suddenly and negatived those men."

"By God, yes!" He sounded suddenly excited, then stopped. "But there's still you."

"He'd let me in with those rays working. I could have been immunised."

It didn't seem like my brain working now. In fact the hair ball was shredding. Camm's defensive notions were coming out of my mouth. I was losing all claim to me as I had been. I was being taken over, by Camm and by something much more than Camm.

Barker said: "Look. I'll get the Defence on to this, and Bowater when he gets here. It could be the answer."

"If it is, don't let anybody else get near. All the ground round the shafts must be impregnated with the activity."

"Sure, yes, I see that."

So he rang off. I sat on my desk, wiping my face. It felt as if someone had chucked a bucket of water in it. Craike was standing by his desk, scratching his back so

his shirt came out of his trousers and staring at me with a funny kind of look that wasn't friendly.

"You taking over?" he said, coming up.

"I'm dying of thirst," I said, looking at my watch. "The King's open. I'm going down."

He took up his jacket and loped along beside me, lanky, knobbly, bent.

"Why don't you tell me?" he said. "After all, I shall know eventually. I want to be ready for a splash."

He didn't know there wouldn't be another *Times*.

We went into the Doniert, just open, smelling of polish and carpet soap. We had a small Bass each. The phone rang for me from the office. I took it up in the telephone hood by the cloakrooms.

Barker said: "Johnny, the post-mortem report. It is the brains. Not physical. I don't understand the report, but it seems they were paralysed. There's no actual damage to tissue, but the signs are the brains were stopped. How did you know?"

"It was the only thing left."

"Defence wants to go up to where the chopper came down."

"They'd be very foolish."

"Will you go with them? They might force you."

"No, I won't go with them. But I'll go alone, if they tell me what to look for."

He spoke to somebody and came back. "Come on up here. All right?"

I said: "All right. Make it a quarter of an hour."

Craike was leaning on the counter, looking at me.

"Don't let them push you round," he said shrewdly.

"You bloody Cornish charmers," I said. "Is nothing secret?"

"Women," he said drily, and finished his beer.

Defence had taken over the long, airy conference room at the copper station. I got there around 11 A.M. The heat wave was going strong.

Defence said: "You think there might be some earth saturation effect from the fantastic frequency Camm was using?"

I said: "I can't think of anything else."

"Mrs. Pensilva insists Camm was going to bring something up. You say copper."

At the back, other Defenders were playing back by phone talk with Barker to see if I said anything different. I could hear my mechanical voice clanking at him.

I said: "That's what Camm was interested in. But only to demonstrate his radio searcher."

He changed direction: "We want to go up there."

I said: "You'll die."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm guessing. The chopper guessed. The rescue party guessed. The answer was death all times. Camm's upset something. I'd leave it alone, you being you and not me."

"There seems to be a safe area outside the shaft."

"A good way outside. I shouldn't risk it."

"Would you be prepared to look round?"

"Yes."

"You feel sure you're immunised?"

"Yes."

They left me and went and discussed it. There was a hellish tension in the quietness, the soft sound of the town outside and the humming summer air bringing it in. Barker came up to me.

He said: "You don't have to risk anything."

"I want to go up there."

"We're waiting on Whitehall. They'll probably put a ban on the whole area till we know what's happening."

"Funny how helpless people are."

"This is entirely new. We have to find the place to start from. They're really waiting for this machine."

I was angry. I had forgotten the Mind Reader. Mention of it came like a shock. If once they hooked it on to Camm, they'd know about the animal in the hill, and

then they'd go for it, burn it, blast it, gas it; poor blind damned thing down there, locked in so it couldn't defend itself . . .

Defence came back and said: "It's been decided to postpone until the machine comes."

They all watched me as I turned away, trying to see if I was frightened. They had no time to make sure, for the phone rang, then another. Defence started to bark from all over the room. I just caught a word here and there.

". . . a couple of defence satellites burned up . . . Burning now? . . . Altitude a thousand miles . . . radar jamming . . . Hold it . . ."

I was looking out of the window then, listening to scraps of frightened talk. The trees clouded under the window, the concrete swan necks of the street lamps curved over them, lighting the night way to Janet's Memorial Hospital, a long bungalow nestling in flowers on the slight hill up out of the town.

There was just a light, a glow, which grew, swelled up in size and brilliance over the hospital roof. It was like the one over the barn. I shut my eyes and shouted. The voices got ragged, started yelling, screaming almost. The day was being burnt out by the brilliance of the light which I could see through my closed lids.

Then it was gone. There was a shouting, moaning, a cursing from the men round me, and somewhere down in the street a woman screamed, and others started in, then stopped. The noise of traffic, the very rumble of life in the town stopped abruptly. There was no sound at all.

I opened my eyes, and beyond the burning blotches of colour I saw the trees and the flowers and the red roofs of the hospital, all as before. Nothing had changed.

The bellowing in the room started again, the smacking of the phone crutches, the calling for new lines, new answers. Like animals; if frightened, run round in circles, screaming.

The animals circled a long time, all over the country

and a long way outside. A lot of rockets pointed upwards, doors rolled open in anger, and bombs in cruiser planes got fused, and radar from St. Cary to hell spun till the screens went blue with heat; men ran and bawled and telephoned and gave orders about nothing. There was nothing to give orders about. Nothing was up there. The satellites just burnt out, as the damned things sometimes do. So they said, to calm themselves.

Because they couldn't pick up anything, not anything at all.

At noon we got the message from Janet's.

Camm had vanished. He had gone completely, leaving his bed, his pyjamas, his watch and a plate with four false bicuspid on.

Sister Carr was dead, sitting calmly in the chair by his bed, still holding a thermometer. Several patients and some of the staff complained of blindness and acute headache, but these were passing.

The Defence and all the other men just stood there and looked and tried to think while voices squawked at them from unheeded phones.

Then three men ran out and the police cars rushed off up the road in pursuit of nothing. Barker went out.

I sat down by the table and slackened right off. I felt confused but better in heart.

Barker was away only a short time. He came back, his red neck bursting up out of his blue shirt collar.

He looked at me. I looked back. I gave him a cigarette and took one myself.

I said: "Don't look at me like that."

He just shrugged and turned away.

"What's it all about?" he said, starting to walk. "It's not natural. What is it?" He turned back suddenly and pointed. "Why don't you worry? Camm's gone!"

I said: "He would have died in there."

"What makes you say that?"

"Damned if I know. It just came."

"But what's happened to him? There's no trace left!"

"He's gone up to heaven in a chariot of fire."

"Something's happened to you. You're not normal. You were fond of him. Why joke now?"

"What the hell can I say? It's as good an explanation as any—if there is any other."

"They'll punch the hell out of you," he said. "They'll wring your brain out till it's like seaweed. Why keep on with this? They'll find out."

"If you think I know how that vanishing trick was done you're way round the bend. What I think is—"

A sergeant came in with Peggy Pensilva. She looked queer. When she glanced my way she just stared right through. Then she looked at Barker as if she didn't know him either.

"It was the eye," she said.

She sat down suddenly at the table, all her grace gone in that single, giveaway flop. I knew what was the matter. I could see it in the staring eyes that looked a million miles away. She suddenly started to tear her clothes off and swear and shout.

Barker signalled the sergeant, but the sergeant had already got wind of the breakdown. A policewoman came in behind him and took charge. She got Peggy by the arm. She had half stripped herself. The policewoman's touch seemed to immobilise her.

"It can't do anything to me," she said, suddenly getting up and turning with the policewoman towards the door. "I'm rich. I can buy one. It's my mine. There's nothing in it. I know."

She went out. We heard a sudden burst of swearing out in the corridor, then a laugh, then silence.

Barker watched me. "They'll look after her."

"She must have been at the hospital."

"Trying to see Camm," said Barker drily. "She was in

the barn with you. She should have been immunised. As it is, the only other witness has gone from us. It begins to look organised."

"She wanted to sell it."

He looked sharp then. "What?"

"Anything. I was just talking. She's a business woman. Everything's business. She thought there was something in what Camm was doing and went all out to find it. Then she tipped off the city and hoped to get it that way."

"But she didn't get it?"

"Camm hadn't finished it. He was just sort of testing. It wasn't commercial. She was too soon." I shut my eyes and saw her Ophelia act again. It hurt.

"They'll rest her up. That's all she wants," Barker said. "She lives pretty hard."

He got up from the table and went to the window. Feet were coming up the stairs. Angry Defence feet. I shut my eyes and tried to relax.

The Mute was coming up, soon. Somehow Camm had worked it out. He reckoned somewhere after 1800 hours on Friday. I don't know how. The knowledge came out of the hair ball, so I knew it.

But I couldn't hold off that long. I knew that too.

They came in, ignored me. There was a lot of soft talk I couldn't catch, and I felt it was about me. At one-ten I finished my cigarette and got up.

Everyone watched me. I went to the door.

"Lunch time," I said. "Don't call me, I'll call you."

The idea they would catch me back, sit on me, pummel away, followed me all the way down the empty stairs. When I got out into the hot sun it didn't feel like me at all.

The whole universe was falling apart. Me first.

I sat on a seat and looked down the avenue of bushes and flowers. It was a pretty way into a police station; the last sweetness you saw before the gates clanged shut.

They had let me go because I couldn't escape from here. Did they know that?

I felt better after a while and walked down to the Donert. Craike was eating his national pasty in a corner with a Guinness.

"Did they flog you?" he said, his mouth munching in circles.

"They don't know what they're doing."

"Don't let them push you around."

I got a drink, and he said: "What have you got in your pocket? Why don't you tell?"

I said: "Camm's gone."

"I heard that. It's magic. All along this has been magic. That's the trouble you get with scientists. You don't know what they're doing. Neither do they. Then one day you wake up. Surprise, surprise! We've all been blown to buggery."

"Camm wasn't a blower-upper."

"What did he do to himself, then? He disintegrated, didn't he? What's the difference?"

I switched. "Peggy's had a breakdown."

He got sharp, anxious. "When? Where? What happened?"

He listened while I told him.

He said: "She was at the office. Tight. She must have been scared. I didn't think she was like that." He thought a moment. "She kept on about an eye. She sounded as if it was still looking at her. She wanted someone to blow the shaft in. Wanted to know who still has an explosives licence. She threw a bloody book at me when I said I didn't know anybody. Sacked me. Sacked the lot. Sold the office—practically. Went out still selling."

"She must have come straight up to the station."

"I said you were up there." He drank slowly. "In case you think this unusual, she blows up into screaming fits quite often. If she can't bulldoze her own way through something, she lets go. I've had it often. I've almost felt

like her husband sometimes, dodging missiles." He watched me with an evil glint in his eye. "I was the one man she couldn't bulldoze. You know that? She couldn't make me. It made her mad. She shouts at me about her triumphs with other men, as if I'm missing something. She isn't just a nympho, she wants to be the first woman Napoleon as well. But Josephine can command great monuments to be raised, yet not the simpler type." He laughed, then faded into gravity and gripped my wrist on the table. "Don't let her bother you. She's a bad bitch."

"She won't bother anyone for a week or two."

He relaxed. "What did Camm do? How did he do it?"

"I don't know what happened."

"He must have known he was going to. He told you he was your father."

I could see his point. I wondered how he knew, but the grapevine I had created in St. Cary leaked on me too.

"You want to eat something," he said.

"It'd be like sawdust."

"You eat something."

In the end I had a sandwich.

"I've been stalling London all morning," Craike said. "Barker told me. Nobody's to know if possible. Sick lot, the English."

All the time people kept coming up and asking me about the rumours. Craike used his hands a lot, gesturing emptiness. He shrugged, shook his head, but said very little. The wave of questions lulled.

He said: "I went back in the files about the ghost on the moors. One of the reports from the radar unit said it was a kind of double thump. The nearest thing they could think of was a heartbeat. Why don't you work on that? You might find yourself with a Loch Ness monster up in the hill somewhere. One that breathes death rays instead of flames."

"You've been too long at the fair, Craike. Camm vanished. What about that?"

"Camm did it himself somehow. He's got a disintegrator."

"What, up in the hospital bed?"

Craike shifted and said: "They're flying in every expert on everything that ever was heard of. There'll be some mad wonderful guesses flying around. Do you know what an expert is, Johnny? He's a man who shrinks his view and his mind down till he can only see a pinhead, and he concentrates on it to try and find a way to make it seem important to ordinary people. Pinhead. He is a pinhead. He has to be—"

"Experts on what? They didn't tell me—yet."

"You'll soon know. They can't do without you. You're the only one who knows now." He laughed like a skull and got up. But he put his bony hand on my shoulder and added, "Don't let them push you round."

He ambled off, and I felt suddenly frightened of being alone in that crowded place. The feeling that I would burst into tears over Camm got me by the throat. Somebody came up to speak, and I just got up, turned my back and fumbled out to the toilets. I went through and into the garden. Nobody was out there, and I let go and cried like a gusher, almost choking not to make a noise in case anybody heard.

It was the first time I'd felt human in all that hot dreamlike day.

After, I cleaned up and went back to the bar and had a couple of drinks. I wished they would come for me, but in the midst of their turmoil and overhung by the shadow of real disaster, Defence was having lunch.

When I stopped typing then there was a silence that chilled me right off. I couldn't place it, then I realised the old electric clock had stopped rumbling. In a sort of panic I jumped on Craike's chair and wobbled it about

on its nail, but it didn't go. From cold I went hot. The silence was appalling. It was another bit of life broken away, tumbling down endless space.

The sound came again, the awful shrieking, thudding bellow of the bells rising up to the sky, making it echo back like a great copper bowl. I stuffed my ears with my hands and just stood there on the chair with my eyes shut.

The dog barked. The noise was getting through the bones of my skull, making them ring like the sky. I uncovered and jumped off the chair and grabbed up the nearest phone. The damned row stopped, its echo rising away into the sky like a grisly spectre shrinking into space. I could hardly speak for panicky breathing.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" My voice was small and far off after the din of the bells. There was no answer, but the soft crawling heat of something outside my head came again, and suddenly I wanted it to take me. I understood there would be no words, only this. It had called me the only way it thought I understood. It had shoved through a surge of power into the network and animated every bell in the place, but now I had reacted, I couldn't answer. My brain tried to reach out and understand, but it was too vague, grasping at nothing and knowing something beyond all value was there.

And then the ghost of Barker's voice whispered in the phone. "Johnny! Johnny! What's happening?"

My head clicked. The Barker voice was loud and near again. Sweat started to run down my face.

"It's the phones," I said. "They keep on."

"The engineer can't find anything wrong, but there's a surge from somewhere now and again. It kicks back here. Tinks the bells. I think—"

I cut him: "What do you want now?"

"The radar's being jazzed. Sometimes there's a double ghost echo coming down to you from the hill, but they

can't place it on the ground or right up in the sky. It's driving the operators crazy."

"It's driving me crazy too."

"Have you seen anything?"

"There's nothing to see." And then suddenly I knew. Nobody told me. Camm's hair ball whipped free a line, and it linked with the radiations I'd got coming in from the shaft up there. "Ring me at eight."

"Right."

"Not before."

"I mean eight, GMT. No fooling. It's to do with the position of the stars, I can't explain. It's something Camm said. You do that."

"I'll do that," he said.

He sounded queer. When I rang off, the feeling that this was almost the last link with the world I knew was breaking up. I felt glad. Like coming up from an illness.

VII

When I went out of the Doniert, the police car was at the kerb. They wanted me to go back to meet Bowater. "Meet" was a good word. It sounded like an invitation to tea.

They were all there then, Defence, Intelligence, Security, a glorious bloodshot range of swivelling eyeballs coming my way when I went in. I didn't know any of them. Any local officers had been crowded out by the big shots from Valhalla. Spurred and sweating, frightened and stunned, they looked at me as if I'd done it. Bowater didn't. Bowater stood out from the mess like the Moon breaking through a stormy sky. He must have been seventy. He had seen it all—all but this—and it didn't scare him as it did the others.

"We need your help, Mr. Newton," he said gently. "It seems Professor Camm left no notes referring to this matter, or if he did, they must have been in the barn and destroyed there."

Somebody else read through what had happened so far. There was one thing I didn't know: An American patrol at fifty thousand feet over the hill had come down by auto pilot off Weymouth with a cargo of dead men, all

smiling, like the others. This had been around noon but not linked up till two hours later. It had the controls set for sea level, the barometric pressure being about right for a landing on the water, but thirteen miles off course, due to nobody being there to correct the gyros.

"Making a total of twenty-six deaths since seven yesterday evening," the Civil Service put in. "The only indication in every case has been a certain slight congestion of the brain cells, hardly detectable but for your advice, Mr. Newton."

"It was the only thing left," I said.

"It was just enough to be detected by ordinary PM methods."

"I don't know how ordinary they are."

Barker fidgeted as if he were responsible for me. Bowater said: "Professor Camm confided in you certain aspects of his work. You saw, for instance, the effect of this leapfrogging wave in the barn before it was burnt out?"

"I saw that, yes. But I don't understand any part of it. I'm not a science man. As for his confidences, his sort of work had made him keep his own counsel. He used to tell me things if he just couldn't hold them any longer."

"This would be when he had been successful?"

"I suppose so. He didn't talk much on the way, just when he got there."

"You were the only relative. Did he leave you any instructions as to his papers should anything happen to him? I worked with him a great deal in the past, remember. He told me that everything would go to you, together with any instructions he wished for his work to go on if he was engaged on anything of importance at the time."

"He didn't tell me, so he couldn't have expected to go."

"You think that?"

"Yes."

"You don't think then, that his disappearance was something engineered by himself?"

"Did he ever speak to you about his theories of teleporting?"

"Often. He was always convinced that our mechanical exploration of space was a waste of time, that everything would finally hinge upon the force of the mind. But teleporting is a transmission of mind. The body must remain behind."

"Why?"

Bowater shrugged. "It is matter. Transporting it by mental powers would mean disintegration and reassembly. I know of no apparatus that can do that, though it has been tried."

I said: "Machines. Apparatus. That's where you're wrong. That's where he always said you were wrong. I am here only because you are all receiving certain simple vibrations from me, giving you sight, sound, smell. If I can detune my frequency, then I cease to exist for you. That's very simple stuff, but Camm believed in simplicity."

Bowater said: "Gentlemen, Mr. Newton means that should he find a means to change the recognisable signals of his existence as far as we are concerned, he would vanish from our orbit, but he could reappear to another animal type, sensitive to different frequencies."

Defence said: "So he would vanish but still exist?"

Bowater said: "He would appear to travel in a flash."

"Body and all?"

"Body and all."

"Is that what he suggests happened to Camm?"

"It is a possible solution."

"Right. But *how*? By that machinery in the barn? But that was destroyed. Is there a replica somewhere?"

I said: "There couldn't be. He hadn't even finished working on that one. He called it a hook-up. It wasn't perfect, for him."

Bowater said: "It might be as well to explain here that where teleporting is concerned, time and distance cease to exist. The machine which Mr. Newton saw was virtually a time destroyer. True, it was done by a mechanical trick, but it reduced several million years into a few minutes. By the same reasoning, it shrank a similar multiple of distance to a few feet."

There was a general mumble. Nobody liked to say he didn't understand. It even seemed clear to me.

Then Bowater brought out the sharp thrust to the vitals.

He said: "Mr. Newton, describe what Mrs. Pensilva calls the eye. Say what happened."

"This thing just sort of swelled up from the ground, gave the impression of something whizzing up at the camera at rocket speed, or faster than that. It could have been an illusion caused by the camera overheating."

Defence said: "What ground? Your ground or the one in the picture?"

"The one in the picture."

The Civil Service said: "There's no possibility these pictures were fakes, some film put through, or tapes?"

"What the hell for? For *me*?"

Bowater said: "We needn't consider fakes. There's proof enough of reality, even though it's of a sort we can't recognise. . . . Did you feel anything at the time this eye came up?"

"I was dazzled as she was. I got a kick in the head. Shock, I imagine."

"Any similarity between that shock and the feeling you had when the men fell dead all around you at the Silva shaft?"

"There must be a similarity in all mental turbulence. I can't answer that."

Defence: "You won't?"

"I don't know the answer. Both times there was shock of a kind, but one was quick and the other slow."

"You said slow?"

"Yet this was the one that killed the men?"

"It must have been."

Bowater said: "I believe Mr. Newton was spared because he had been the subject of radiation from this fantastic frequency Camm was working with."

Defence: "So Camm was protected too?"

"Obviously. He was down the shaft at the time."

"Is it possible to reconstruct this machine of his and so get protection for a proper investigation?"

"Impossible."

Royal Navy: "We lost a helicopter at low altitude, and a U.S. aircraft at a high one. What's the range of this radiation?"

Air Force said: "Two satellites burned up. A thousand miles out. There was no signal of attack from them. That sounds to us like something coming in, not striking up."

He was right there. I knew it then. He had explained what had puzzled me right through, how we were getting a double effect, one fast as a flash, another slow. Quite suddenly then I knew what was happening. The hair ball had almost unstripped.

Defence said: "The radiation is not Camm's. I don't think there can be any doubt of that. The possibility has been tossed to us from London that by his freak signals Camm had got in touch with people on another planet."

The Navy: "A radio war?"

Bowater: "Rubbish. This is more advanced than that. I feel that Professor Camm explained it as best he could to Mr. Newton, but that Mr. Newton had not the technical training to absorb it."

Defence: "If it went into his head, it's still there somewhere, whether he understands it or not."

"I don't even remember."

"That won't matter. We've found that most things that go into the brain stay there. Sometimes you pick it out, sometimes you can't. But we've got the machine now

that will pick anything off the mental bookshelves."

"The Mind Reader."

Defence: "Would you agree to having a test?"

The eyeballs were fixed on me. It was like looking at a sea of boiled eggs. The heat of fear made some kind of comic nightmare from a tension that screwed up like a steel hawser.

If I let them use that bastard thing, they would know the lot. The Mute would be destroyed before it ever got free.

That was all I thought of then, though the obvious danger to St. Cary was staring me in the face. I let the only thought drive me, playing for time.

I said: "I won't agree."

The eggs grew nearer, bigger.

"Why not?"

"There's a danger this machine could cause a deterioration in the brain cells."

"Who said that?"

"Camm."

"Is that so, Sir Henry?"

Bowater: "I don't know. It's very possible. This machine is in the experimental stage. We can't tell what side effects there might be."

I felt easier. The eggs had shifted. There was a general mutter.

Bowater went back: "When you saw the eye there was a burst of light?"

I said: "Yes. The camera burst."

"It burst internally. The case didn't burst. I have seen the barn."

"Yes. It burnt out."

"Yet you saw a blinding flash of light?"

"I thought so. You get flashes from shock, sudden blows when you see stars. I'm not sure which kind it was."

"Like the one you saw over the barn later on? Like the

one you saw over the hospital this morning? Like that?"

"Could be. I never connected them."

Which was, in effect, the truth. But piece by piece the inquisition was building up a small picture of the truth, not for the members, but for me. And the truth was a picture of disaster, for these men, for St. Cary and for everything around it.

A cold fear gripped me and I felt very queer.

Bowater: "Do you feel all right?"

"No. I must have a break!"

I saw him make a wipe-out gesture with his hands, and there was a slow relaxation of the interrogators. A mumble of easier talk began.

I got up, feeling dizzy. Fatty Barker got my arm and led me out of the hot room onto the landing and into the lavatory. I shoved my face in a basin of cold water. It was the wrong treatment. I felt hotter, worse.

My mind seethed with nightmare pictures like clips from a film. I saw them dead, smiling, lying about the streets with nobody to clear them up; Craike, Leila, everybody I knew.

I opened my eyes. Bowater was standing with Fatty, looking at me. I felt a great flood of anger against them, against myself, against the burning dilemma I couldn't sort out.

"You can't win this!" I remember shouting. I remember sitting in a chair. The floating began again. There was no one with me. I sank down the deepening darkness of the mine shaft, coaxed down, and saw again the hole that Camm had cut with light, and went through and down the awful crevasse to the blackness of the pit. I felt the heat of alien thoughts in my head. I felt I was screaming and the sound was shrieking off the broken rock walls of the great chasm, but I did not hear it, only felt it in the bones of my head. The shrieking became a flash of pain that stopped everything abruptly.

I remember feeling coming back. I remember

thinking, "I've had it now, like the others." Then I remember seeing Bowater like God, close up to me. I reached out and touched his craggy face to make sure it was there. Then I went out like a light.

When I came to I knew they'd used the machine. I could feel it, as if in unconsciousness the foul thing could be felt probing in the alleys of the brain like some disgusting worm burrowing in the living flesh.

Bowater was standing there by the chair, smoking a cigarette.

I said: "Did they?"

"They insisted."

There was nobody else in the room. Fatty Barker had gone out.

I said: "Well?"

He looked out of the window and stubbed the cigarette on the sill. I felt my whole being poised on the edge, silent, stretched too far to move any more.

He said: "It seems you're in love with a girl called Leila."

The stretch relaxed, let go, collapsed.

I said: "*What?*"

He said: "I should be careful not to seek her Hamlet-wise. Like mum, I mean."

"Oh. It was like that?"

He propped himself against a lavatory basin.

He said: "Something blanked off that machine. Something is blanking off all the machines we've got. It burned out Camm's equipment last night because that was a direct means of finding out about this—Something. Something blows down the air spies. *Something.*"

"But you got about Leila?"

"That was clear and true as truth. You probably don't realise how truthfully you think about that."

"It was going back. I *was* in love with her. That was a while ago."

"It still is—now, whatever you think."

He started to wander about.

"I could guess all this, but I might be wrong. You're under some compulsion. Is it Camm's?"

"I did promise him I wouldn't tell about his work. But I didn't know enough to tell."

He stopped and leaned against the basin again.

"If Camm wanted it, then I want it."

I watched him.

He went on: "I worked with him for many years and never respected a man more. I know what his feelings were when his work was taken and developed into foul things he hated. That was where secrecy first began. It began with compassion. He wasn't a specialist. He didn't allow his mind to be shrunk. He saw everything against the background of a wayward Mankind. He hated the killer, the destroyer. He thought Man's killer attitude was fear goaded by the subconscious knowledge that his senses were inferior to most animals. He told me that Man is a mutation, that somewhere far back along the line the real Man got lost, perhaps left the planet altogether, leaving only this imitation behind."

I said: "He never was quite that bald with me, or it didn't sound like it, because he wasn't angry about it. That's the point perhaps. He wasn't *angry*. Just wanted to try and find some way of holding up a mirror that would teach. Perhaps he wasn't angry because he knew he was one of the mutations."

Bowater said: "He said once that there might be more religion if Man suddenly got the idea God might be a bull."

"I remember that."

Bowater said: "I think he found something in the hill up there. Perhaps he woke something from a million years ago. Perhaps he succeeded in finding the mirror he wanted. Did he?"

"I don't know."

I got up feeling better but rough. I could still feel that foul thing crawling in my brains.

Bowater said: "Take me to the farm."

"You've been there."

"Not with you."

I wanted to go there myself to see what they had done up there. I said: "All right. You'd better fix the inquisition."

He went into the big room. I waited at the top of the stairs, looking down at a policeman on guard at the bottom.

I had to do something, and the time for it was closing up. Vaguely I could see a way out, but I didn't know how to get to it. When I tried to think it seemed hopeless. I was up against a wall of enmity, implacable, determined ignorance. From the attitude it seemed only one thing could come! Death. At least I had the sense then to see that, but in Bowater there seemed to be a faint chance of escape.

Long gone was the time I could have doubted what I was doing. There was only one thing for me to do no matter what: get that Thing out of the hill and see it go free. There was nothing else, but getting to it seemed like travelling in a dark forest of animated trees with vicious human minds glowing like the eyes of hell in their boles. But it was the damn human minds I had to save as well. If only I could save the ordinary ones and leave those bastard gods upstairs to stew in their arrogance it would have been easier. But it was they who could order the rest out. Nobody else. Panic could drive them later, but it would be too late to save anybody then.

Bowater came back. We went down and out. My car was there. It had been there all day. I had forgotten where it was.

I thought as I got in: "Leila. Can't be. Not still."

But that was the curse of the machine. That was what Camm had objected to: He said it was like a film of

yourself taken when you weren't looking, so that you didn't recognise what you really were.

Bowater sat there and smoked a cigarette. He lit two on the way. His long fingers on the left hand were yellow with them.

Coming down the familiar track to the roof of the house in amongst the trees it was like a sudden ache for something gone forever. For the first time I felt that Camm had gone. That he would never come back here, never animate the greystone with his brilliant life and thoughts again.

There were Army men there, an officer in charge who saluted Bowater and wondered who I was. We went into the house, and the ache grew worse. There was an Intelligence man there. He had all Camm's papers neatly stacked in piles on the big table where Leila had typed his notes. They were all mine now. The sudden realisation made me feel sick again.

We just wandered in the house, room after empty room. Bowater came with me but never said a word. It made me feel easier. I got the idea then that here was a way out, that here was understanding, sympathy. I began to watch him. He looked at the rooms as if he saw a part of Camm he had known, and it touched him.

We went out onto the lawn, headed for the towering barn. It was hot and humming with the little sounds of life. Bowater made a signal. A couple of Army guards moved away from the barn door and started chatting some distance off.

Bowater was truly in command. It made my mind up then.

We went into the black cathedral. There was still a faint tang of the burnt metals and stuff. Bowater turned the lights on.

"A selective burn-out," he said. "I noticed before that every bit of equipment was burnt out but the lights were untouched. This excludes any form of accident."

"It wasn't accident," I said.

"No." He lit a cigarette and sat down in Camm's chair at the wrecked control desk. He didn't say anything, just looked at the tumbled robots, their entrails spilling on the floor.

My mind was made up, yet I couldn't jump.

At last he said: "He got in touch with something, didn't he?"

I said: "He found a living animal in the hill, the last of original Man. The Man who lived before the beast took over. It's there now. It must come out—tomorrow. I can't explain this, but he worked it out astronomically and—passed it to me. It should be about seven in the evening."

He said: "Why did it kill? I must tell them that."

"It didn't mean to kill. It was trying to communicate. But the force of its thought power, the speed of its transmission is more than the shrunken human brain can stand. It tries to call, but its thoughts just burst our brains. Like talking to God when he's thinking of a thousand different things at once, and you, like some maddened little terrier, just trying to decide which ball to run after."

He thought awhile, staring at the boxes, then he said: "The frequency of this Being's mind must have been reached by this light and radio leapfrog. The carrier wave Camm found was not a wave but the telepathic link from far out to the one remaining link in the hill."

"That's what he meant. I think myself that some influence of it reached him before he came here, when he just used to walk the moors for relief from his work. I think somehow he must have done—got the idea. It didn't come straight but probably suggested to him to try out his new radios here."

"Or perhaps it made you get out of the train at St. Caryl that night."

"I don't think so. The fare just ran out on me."

He shrugged. "In fact, using such frequencies he

might have got the fringe of the telepathic beam from almost anywhere. That would have drawn him here for the better results."

I said: "Camm didn't remember the beginning. He always said there was no point in dwelling on the past. So he decided to look back several million years!" I laughed then. It made Camm so real, so dear.

Bowater said: "This machine he produced provided a penetration which immunised you and Camm."

"And the woman too, but—something happened there."

"Yes. Something happened there. She couldn't hold it . . . the eye. You spanned a million years in a flash, as they do. Time was destroyed, distance too. The eye knew you had started to watch, and it came and slammed out your sight. It meant to stop you. Do you realise why? There are numbers of these Beings. Where, I don't know. You may have worlds within worlds, time belts within time belts, a hundred existences going on parallel tracks, but only the wisest can use those tracks as he will."

I said: "They came and destroyed the barn. They came and took Camm. It's teleporting, and takes matter with it."

"It seems there is nothing else it can be. The light seen over the barn and the hospital was not light but the shock glare formed in the eye of any animal; the only reaction to anything actually moving before it at more than the speed of light. A visual blast effect. That was it. Not light. Not an explosion, but a hurt of the eye by speed. Just as the brains of the dead men were confused into stillness by the speed of thought transmission."

He lit another cigarette.

"So there we are, Mr. Newton. I begin to see what your problem has been."

I said: "So far as I know this Being has been trying to communicate, to be friendly. The result was death. Oth-

ers have come in—on protective raids if you like—to make sure this one gets free. I see that now, though it was a long time coming. But you see, if there is any opposition attempted by us, they can strike everyone dead in an instant. Everyone for miles round, maybe for hundreds of miles round. That's what you've got to persuade the government about."

He got up and started to walk, slowly.

He said: "You don't realise how difficult that will be."

I said: "I do. But it must be done in the next twenty-four hours. Before that, perhaps. I can't be sure Camm's gen was dead right because I don't know how he found it out."

He said: "The immediate solution is evacuation. No two ways about that. But how to persuade, my God! They won't understand, you know. They'll be like children kicking and screaming at a locked door. They won't believe their nuclear devices, their gas, their radio, laser and the rest of the witch-doctor bolsters won't prevail over this Thing. They won't, you know. I can hear them now, as I have heard them for years. They'll want to try and trap it, or kill it."

I said: "That's what Camm was afraid of."

"He should have known better. It's us that must be killed. Ignorance must die in the end, whenever that end is to be."

He stopped walking. It was hot as hell. I saw the crate of beer Camm had left and took one. He came up to my elbow and took the full glass from me. He drank some and walked away, holding it.

"Let's just get our minds clear, Mr. Newton. When did you first know of the Thing in the hill?"

I told him, and I told him about the ghost of the old mine, and radar echoes of the long ago war.

He said: "It has been living there as Camm said, millions of years. Perhaps frozen, perhaps suspended in gas, but an embryo that somehow began to beat a hundred

years ago. But it didn't wake. It stayed in the womb of the hill, unborn. It was Camm with his bloody wireless who woke it up. It was Camm falling on that incredible frequency that connected it with the others out in the stars. And he not only connected with it, but with those others, wherever they are in the mighty heavens around us. It always frightens me, the vastness of space, the minuteness of Man. Our sheer inability to understand it. The straining of trying to understand with a brain too small to receive the knowledge which is flying past it all the time. Camm was always trying for knowledge, for understanding. But he's roused all hell with this. Do you know, if he hadn't made this machine, there would have been no contact with the Thing at all. It would have developed down there, and at the right time it would have teleported itself away. Probably the only trace of it would have been the old stories of the ghost in the mine. It makes one wonder if all ghosts are not based on some such disturbances. But Camm raised it. Camm made it think it might communicate, that there was some sympathy in understanding here. So it has tried, with staggering results."

I said: "And the men died. You think others come from outside?"

"Think of the defence satellites which burnt up. Radar might act two ways on trying to detect something moving too fast for it. It can just let it by and register nothing. Or it might try, like those human brains, and burn out. I don't know. I feel so old, so slow, even too tired to try and work it out."

He held out his glass. I filled it again for him.

He walked away and said: "It's going to be terribly hard. They won't believe in a superior Being. The only God they can imagine is one like them. All made of ticky-tacky. How can we get at them? It'll be harder to get into these men's pig's heads than communicate with the Thing in the hill. You've done that, up to a primitive

point, and after indoctrination by absurdly high frequency. But this other is a different thing. Evacuate the people. Why? Because they will be killed by this Thing. Then we'll kill this Thing first. Get me round that one without killing a few hundred more."

I said: "Tell them so far men have been killed by friendliness. Just imagine what it could do if it got unfriendly."

He looked at me and then started to laugh.

"You have the answer there, Mr. Newton, but it depends on convincing them it was being friendly. Try that one."

I said: "If they won't listen, they'll die and thousands of people with them."

He said: "All except you. Do you realise what a gift Camm made you? You had the baptism of fire before the baptist was destroyed. The only super man now living."

"There is the woman, Mrs. Pensilva."

He shook his head in denial. "That brain won't be any good. There must have been a weakness, purely chemical, I imagine, but a weakness. You hated her. It came out in the machine. She was trying to buy up Camm, stop him. She got wind of the velocity frequency. It would have put every computer firm in the dustbin tomorrow, and lots of other things besides. It was a new road Camm travelled. He would have overtaken everything, radar, laser, the mighty electronic abacus, so-called brain—One of her biggest holdings was in computers."

I said: "Where did she get wind of it, then?"

"Camm wanted finance. He put it in his old firm, with a brief outline of what he meant to do. Someone leaked. There is too much bribery about. She had no idea what the full result of Camm's work would be, just what it might do to her. She wasn't going to let it."

I said: "It doesn't matter now. There isn't another of these machines. There are no papers. It was all on the tapes—over there—when they were tapes, not draggly

bits of burnt-out spider's webs. It was there. It's gone. Somebody will do it all again."

"It might take a generation."

I said: "It's this generation right here in St. Cary I'm more interested in. Get it out. All of it. People, animals, the lot."

He looked at his watch. He said: "Can you describe what this Thing has tried to tell you? Can you sort anything out?"

"No. But he has called me down the shaft."

"You have been down the shaft?"

"I seem to have been. When you were with me in the police dyke. You and the chief constable."

His eyes narrowed and almost closed up. He said: "I didn't know that. He gets you there?"

"Yes. He wanted me to go right down the crevasse, right down. My brain gave in. Sort of cracked, like a light in a black screen. I was back in the chair again."

He said: "You're a long way towards it. Much farther than you think."

"My body was in the chair."

"That was why the crack came. You couldn't separate. One time in the future, your body will go as well."

I came out in a sick sweat, but it died and I had a strange feeling of relief.

"That won't happen to me. I'm just the old mud man, of the earth, earthy."

"If the place is evacuated, Mr. Newton, we shall never know what happens here. Do you realise that? Any cameras will be burnt out, transmission numbed, everything we have will be rendered quite useless. We could try, of course. We could see if it worked. But I think it won't. Like the satellites, the equipment will be overloaded, burnt out. Film, lenses, tubes—there is nothing we have which could cope with such speeds. There is only you."

It did not come as a shock. It was as if I had known it

all the way along, as if I had seen it for many days and knew the answer.

I said: "I couldn't go, anyway."

He said: "No. You couldn't—now."

I remember only parts of the heated battle Bowater fought over that long, red mahogany table, the sun pouring in the big, fully open windows, the men in their shirts, sweating with heat and fear. Sometimes I could think of nothing but my nausea. The whole thing was jerking my nervous system, and the first to go was my stomach balance. I just wanted to drink.

Bowater opened with explaining the presence in the hull. They didn't believe it. They didn't believe anything could do what it had already done.

But there was no other explanation. It could have been an hour of near shouting and angry retaliation between the frightened men before suddenly, it seemed, they faced the truth as the inevitable. Bowater pressed home through the breach and got in amongst them, like a devil in amongst the clergy, darting round, sticking a fork in their backsides.

The only man with Bowater and me right from the start was Fatty Barker, red as a tomato and loud in protest. It was then I got to like him. He was a protector of the weak, the small ones.

Somebody kept saying: "But it kills men. That's the point! It must be treated as an enemy!"

Bowater kept batting this one, patting it back to the frightened bowler.

Defence said: "Put a nuclear device down the shaft!"

Bowater said: "How? And who? Any men near that shaft will be struck dead. This thing isn't a stupid man. He knows what we're trying to do."

"Shoot one down it?"

Bowater said: "If you can devise a means of doing it, I

should like to hear it. You've lost two satellites. What do you think would happen to a shell? A rocket? It would be like trying to chase a jet on a bicycle."

"Drop one."

"What happens to the aircraft? The crew dies. The device would be destroyed before it even left the plane. And meanwhile, what is happening to the civilian population?"

Defence said: "Evacuate them!"

Bowater said: "Thank God for that! We've agreed one thing, then. Now let's get on."

There was a considerable discussion. Civil Authority couldn't agree about evacuation. It took another hour, and then they got on to London. Nobody would carry the can for such a decision.

Gradually Bowater got the true picture into their minds, and only because they just couldn't think of or imagine anything else that would fit what had happened. But still they wouldn't believe their weakness.

Army said: "Under the Defence Act 1966 the use of nuclear devices in conditions of severe—"

Barker shouted then: "Acts won't help here! You've got to get out of this nuclear mentality. It belongs to the Steam Age!"

Bowater said: "Exactly. The weapon this needs is a mind big enough to embrace it, and the mind is the one thing missing in our armoury."

Defence said: "What about Newton? He's immune. He could get a nuclear device there—"

Army shouted: "Don't be a twat. How could a bloody civilian handle—?"

Navy bawled: "Of course he couldn't. Blow the bloody town!"

Thank heaven that one passed. There was a policeman by the door, and I got him to fetch me a glass of beer. Time was getting on. My throat was so harsh I could hardly speak.

They still argued. They would not face the truth even now, that we had no power over this Thing at all. I remembered an Army padre who had given us a short service once, before we had gone off into the jungle.

"Lord help us," he had begun piously, "to kill as many of the other buggers before dinner as to bring this business to an end."

He ended in a hospital besieged by a squad of psychiatrists trying to find how he had seen the truth. And here were his successors all bellowing the same thing, as if there were no other solution in the wide world.

Then London called back.

The Prime Minister was going to get in on the act. He would land in the square of St. Cary in two hours. As Camm had said, he was the biggest blow-up of a political nit Great Britain has ever suffered for universal suffrage, but one thing I did know about him: He would do what Bowater advised.

I felt weak inside. There was a sudden easing of the atmosphere, as if everyone present felt he had shed responsibility for the whole mysterious affair. Bowater sat back and wiped his face with a handkerchief. I noticed his yellow-stained fingers trembled slightly.

Defence said: "Better look out that evacuation scheme in the Civil Defence file."

The retreat was on.

God's coming.

Run for your lives.

I went back to the office. They let everything go till the PM came. PM. Same as post mortem. Well, well.

Craike was alone there, typing. He got up and walked round a bit. Then he stopped and looked at me.

"You're the only one they can use, eh? Don't do it for them. They'll sell you. You can't trust the bastards. They'll shove you forward and order your memorial stone at the same time. Attack! attack! Up mugs and at

'em. Wish I could be with you, but I'm in a reserved occupation. Look at me tugging at the hairs holding me back. Don't fall for it, Johnny. I know you, but don't. I can see it coming. It's their job. The Big Ones. Let them go."

I said: "You don't grasp the business. There's nothing to fight, just something to try and understand. That's why everybody's floored. Somebody said it was funny but that with all the ways we've got of killing each other we haven't got a solitary single idea of anything that would touch this."

"Perhaps he doesn't understand us either, this Thing."

"He probably thinks there's nothing to understand."

He picked up his jacket and slung it over his shoulder. "Let's go next door. It's too damn hot to talk."

We went to the Doniert, but he still talked. He talked about all sorts of things but always came back to the start again.

"Don't let them push you there because you've got something nobody else has. Don't agree. Don't let them push you. Why don't you take advice sometimes? What's the good of you being blasted out of the window just so they can find out—"

That's when a man shouted in the street.

"There's a chopper landing outside. Prime Minister!"

Craike turned as he leaned on the counter, then straightened, switched his jacket over his shoulder and ambled out. I heard the blades whopping the air and kids shouting, police bellowing short, sharp orders.

I knew they would want me, so I went out, through the backway and into the garden. It was getting dark. I went through the garden door and into the car park. I whistled. When I was half across the big space the dog came racing up behind, almost tripping over the fury of his own tail.

The town was draining towards the square. We let it go by and went through the Green Park to the river. He

found a ball some child had lost. I threw it for him in the gathering dusk, and he kept bringing it back. Then we sat down and I told him about it, trying to make out what I felt. But I couldn't sort it out.

It seems we stayed there a long time. It got dark and the Moon came up. My mind was like shuffling through a pack of unrelated photographs. Camm, Tom, the inquisition, Leila, hospital, Craike. They didn't seem to have anything to do with each other, but behind them all was the ghastly image of a world that was, a monster of disaster, grinning down on them, knowing they didn't see it up there.

The globe became big, slowly turning under me. I began to shrink down on it, in one appalling dive, so that it swelled up and the sea sparkled either side of the leg of land, and down more to the bosom of the hills and the ruins of the mine temples scattered around, and then the roof of the tallest was beneath me as I swung down, past it to the crater of the shaft, and into the darkness and the heat in headlong, silent flight where no senses worked but sight. I felt it reaching for me, a sudden suffocation, a mental smothering as if my brains were being sucked into a greater one, slowly absorbed, emptied . . .

The crack of light split my head again.

The dog barking brought me back, stiff, cold with sweat.

I got up. We went back towards the town.

I met Leila walking back across the car park. She had come to look for me. She told me the Bigs had been looking for me, but the Premier had gone again, hopping away to London.

Then she said: "Tom's gone."

I said: "Oh."

She said: "You haven't seen him?"

I said: "No."

The dog sat down as if he knew the talk would go on some time.

"They're going to evacuate everybody," she said. "Did you know?"

"Yes."

"It seems funny, having been there all yesterday in that house, right by it."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. I suppose they've got some idea what they're going to do with us."

"They're using an air-raid evacuation plan," I said. "An old one, in case of nuclear attack."

"Where will you go?" she said. "You won't conform to a plan, will you?"

I said: "I haven't decided." We walked on a bit. "You'd better get some things together, it's to be an early start."

She stopped and turned to me. I knew what was coming, and my heart faded into my boots.

"Can't we go together?" she said.

"No," I said. "I'm helping. One of the last to go."

She just said, "Oh," and I could feel all of her in that little sound. For a moment I wondered why on earth she ever went from me, when she had constantly been trying to come back.

We came to the corner of the car park where it breaks out into the street. There was a lot of activity starting up, many cars, hired vans with loudspeakers, and a lot of white police cars with flashing blue lights on top, come in from towns all over the county, and Devon too. It was an exercise all right. It said a lot for a plan they could get out of file, blow the dust off and operate almost within minutes.

We came into the street and saw vans from the BBC, Western Television, camera hire companies, electricity board, everybody who could supply, fix and get the juice to cameras of all conceivable types. There seemed to be as many men up on the roofs against the sky as there were milling excitedly in the streets, with the police driving them on. Like men driving cattle.

We stopped by the entrance of the park alley.

"You'll go in a bus, I expect," I said. "Better get back home. They'll come and tell you."

She stood still a moment, watching the excitement. Then she turned to me and raised her face.

"In case anything happens," she said. "Good-bye, Johnny."

I kissed her, and I could feel the ghost of our love moving in me all over again. I let her go. She turned and hurried off in the crowd.

At 1 A.M. she was back at the office door, having heard the truth about me, but I didn't see her then. Just heard her and turned the other way. There were a lot of people yelling down there then, calling up to me, but the door was barred and I just stayed in the dark office, watching for the sky to go grey. Fatty Barker was down on the stairs, making sure they didn't bust the door in.

By 11 P.M. lights were on all over the town. I never saw such a blaze, nor heard such a noise. Nobody pulled any curtains or shut any windows, and God knows how many radios and TVs were left blaring away in case bulletins came. They did. Orders for collection of persons were given out and repeated over and over in between music. Then one by one the sets were switched off and the lights went out and buses went away and cars fled into the night, and gradually the quiet blanket came down.

I stole the dog about midnight. How the time passed to then I don't remember, just wandering, watching it all idly, knowing then that there was not yet anything to fear. The people would get away. There would be no interference. The Mute was not due then.

I remember the noise was dying a bit. The town hall clock struck, and the pips of Greenwich shrieked out of a thousand windows a few seconds after. That clock was never right.

I went to the wall of the bookie's garden. The dog was on it, watching me.

"Jason!" I hissed.

His ears pricked, he swung round, his tail whipped, and we went off into the deserted office. He ran beside me up the stairs. I took him on past the office and into our stationery store in the attic. I gave him some bits of carpet and told him, "Wait!"

His tail stopped. He cocked his head. He didn't get the message, but I shut the door and let him find it out.

Then I went down to the dark office and watched out of the open windows. I watched to see the bookie go. The fact he might raise a yell for the dog scared me more than any thought of the Thing in the hill.

But the Jag came up, and the fat slob bundled in, thrusting his wife before him, and having his clerk stuff the boot and back seat with lord knows what. They drove off with the boot so bung full it wouldn't close.

When it was gone I sat down in my old swivel chair and tried to think. But I fell asleep.

Craike came up about one. He had his jacket slung over his shoulder, his shirt was out at the back. I felt when he went everything would be gone. There was a hell of a row down on the pavement, people shouting, calling out, police shepherding them into the long line of buses, the rumble of the first cattle trucks; engines revving, the changing gear of the cars jammed up trying to get out of the square.

He went to his desk, took out some papers, crammed them into the pockets of his jacket. Then he turned round and looked at me.

He said: "Do you have to do this?"

I said: "Yes."

Then he shrugged and turned away. He went to the door. I heard him trip on that worn bit of lino on the stairs, then he blew his nose like a trumpeting elephant,

and I heard the crowd roaring louder as he opened the door down there. There was some kind of argument, he swore at them, and then the roar faded and the door slammed shut.

It was the last I should ever see of Craike, and I cried.

Barker came up about two. His jacket was undone, his buttons shining. He was hot, tired, bright-eyed with fatigue. He sat down at the desk and gave me a cigarette. I refused and went over and put the kettle on for tea.

He brought some things from a brief case he had and put them on the desk. A battery tape, a clockwork one, a pocket radio, two-way.

"They think the phones will hold," he said. "They have some kind of technical reason. Don't ask me. You have a direct line to HQ Saltash on every phone in this office. Trebled up. Every phone in this town is on direct line or will be. You can ring from anywhere if you go out of here."

"Better leave some coins," I said.

He laughed in a sickly kind of way, then brought out the last gift and laid it on my desk.

"A Smith & Wesson .38," I said. "I haven't seen one since my Army days."

"It might be useful," he said. "You don't know."

I knew who he meant it for. It wasn't likely to be any good against the Mute when he came.

The noise in the street was getting less. I got in a bit of a panic at the idea soon it would die altogether.

"It's total evacuation," he said. "Nobody left here at all. We've wired up television everywhere, but they seem to think it might not work. I'm not an expert. I don't know why. The thing is, Johnny, everything they've got to know depends on you." Then he stared straight at me so that I looked away. "You can change your mind. It's up to you."

I told him again: "I couldn't go."

He said: "Suppose the magic that's protected you breaks down?"

"Why should it?"

He fidgeted with his silver buttons. "The vicar wants to come up and see you."

"For God's sake! That old bag? Why does he want to see me now? Look, man, I don't know what's going to happen. It could be the greatest thing any man has ever seen. It may be I won't be able to see anything at all. I may be hurt, I may go mad, but I know this for dead cert sure—I'm not going to die!"

"Kettle's boiling," he said.

So I made tea. It was right what I'd said. All along I've known that whatever happened to me, I wouldn't die. The time was past for that. He just sat there, checking the shots in the revolver, thinking I was mad already.

"I'll be on the line all the time," he said. "Bowater's there. Any technical points . . ." Then he smacked the gun down on the desk. "I don't know why they agreed to you staying!"

"Camm said it might mean the start of real knowledge. Bowater thinks the same. The end of all the old rockets, radio—all the old rubbish. The start of a new era, where the mind is the key instead of the bowels."

"Or it might be too far out of reach," he said.

He stayed till all the noise had gone and there was just a white police car standing out there in the dark. Then he did up his jacket. His fat fingers shook a bit, I felt the tremor again when he shook my hand.

He said: "See you tomorrow."

Then he went. I looked down and watched the car go off; the spinning blue light on the roof was the last thing I saw move in the square for two hours, when another one came, just for a little while, after dawn. And when that was gone, the big silence was everywhere.

Now there's nothing more to write. Nothing to do. Just wait. It's hot, sunny, still. The dog lies there, his face on his feet, watching me. He knows.

Several times I've been on flights way up there, right over the mine. This time he's not trying to bring me down to the shaft, just go on up and up, right off the Earth, right away into the darkness and the stars. It's like going straight into a dream. I get breathless, but the fear of it is going. I keep wanting to do it again, as if there is a kind of freedom there, a final bust away from everything that tied me down.

The dog doesn't worry any more. When I come back each time he's lying there, watching me. I reckon he's got used to it.

At six forty-five I suddenly wanted to go, just once, the last time round.

I called Barker: "I'm going out awhile. Ring you back."

He said, panicky: "Keep in touch!"

I said: "There's a phone on every corner."

We went down into the silent street. At first I stood there, frightened to go on. The dog looked back, wondering why. I went on after him, down the hill out of the square, past the silent shops. The windows above were open, dark, gaping mouths; no light moved, no car sounded in the park below. There were some there still, standing round, dark-eyed, lost. In the shop windows the bargain offers still yelled, at nobody. It was walking with death. Even the sun seemed to fade in the overpowering greyness.

I turned and went back, into the empty square. It was moving with ghosts, people I knew should be there; Benny, landlord of the Doniert saying to me last night, "I'll leave it open, Johnny. Take anything you want."

He was the last person I spoke to before I went up into the office and started to wait.

I couldn't stand the grey, dead town any more. We went back up into the office.

Barker rang as if he had seen me just come in.

He said: "The echo we've been getting is a fox. It's deliberately falsifying the receiving end. It isn't an echo. It's just foxing us. A kind of mesmeric wobble, Bowater says. We can't get normal echoes now even of things we know are there."

"Can you see anything with all these cameras?"

"Jazz. Just jazz. They say the interference is hotting up. Can you see anything?"

I said: "It isn't due yet. I'll let you know. It's when certain stars come into a set position, just momentarily. That'll be the moment. Camm told me. He worked it out by astronomy—or perhaps something told him."

"How do you feel?"

"Here and there. One minute I'm at peace, floating by the mine in a dream, next I'm so full of sentiment I get my throat bunged up and can't see for tears. I wasn't built for this kind of mind splitting."

"You don't know the time it's meant to come?"

"I shall know."

"Let us know the instant!"

"How will that help you?"

"We might be able to help you."

"You can't. Now, forget it. The thing you don't realise is the worst part is waiting. Once it comes, it'll be all right."

"You must let us know! Leave the phone open."

"No. I'll call when it comes."

I didn't bother to think what he meant. I don't want any help, or any interference. I just want it to come. When I think of it, alone and coming soon, there is a strange peace on everything, the calm of a great horizon, vast but not frightening. But when I go back to myself alone, just small and frightened and in this place, there is a terrible loneliness like an eroding pain in me eating its

way out. All I can do then is call the dog over and want to cry again. I wonder if it would understand that, or if these things are all just too small.

I edited everything Johnny Newton ever wrote. I found the typescript, which runs up to here, scattered all round amongst the wreckage, some of it charred brown but still just readable. That is the story of the three days before it came.

• What he told me about what happened *that* day, Friday, was all on tape; items just spoken as they occurred at different times during the waiting. Some of these were melted out, but we joined up, rewound and edited them too. I have tried to splice these recordings in to where I believe they interrupted the writing.

The final tape was unfit for any sort of reproduction, due to damage. I had official permission to join it up, get the story out. That story comes now.

There is just one thing. Johnny Newton had to tell a story of himself, and faked it. He does not half come through. He was two things he doesn't play at all: He was a very quiet man, a very brave man. He was also the biggest, softest touch that ever came to St. Caryl. He lent Tom the money to marry his own girl because he thought she loved the other man. He was wrong. They were all wrong. The noise he describes down on the pavement during the evacuation wasn't people being loaded into the buses but people he did good to, yelling for him to come out and go with them; then trying to shove the police away from the office door to get him out. They thought he was being forced to stay. They were wrong. Everybody in this was wrong.

Perhaps Johnny was wrong to stay. It's very hard to say. In normal times, if he had thought he would do anybody any good by staying, he would have stayed. This time was not normal. From the night in Camm's barn he was under an influence which none of us under-

stood then, or perhaps now, either. At times we could see the difference in him; that sudden loss of connexion with us, the only outward sign of a mind fighting to understand what was happening to it. I remember him staring through my head and saying: "Teleport. It sounds like a place where phones land." That was the clue. It meant nothing. Perhaps he was compelled to stay by this outside compulsion; but as I say, if he thought it would do anybody good, he would have stayed anyway.

It is a good thing he did. Otherwise I believe we might all be dead by now. He formed the only buffer between an overwhelming force and an almost equally bewildering ignorance.

What follows is what came onto the tape in his pocket during the last half hour. It is brief, unadorned, because much was burnt out and lost and what remains is pieced together, a scrappy record, but the only one.

VIII

At 7 P.M. Barker rang again. He said: "We get an echo now and again coming and going behind the interference. It's definitely coming down to you, almost in the town, but we can't tell if it's on the ground, under it, or in the air. Can you see anything?"

Johnny said: "I keep telling you, there's nothing. Nothing at all. It might be a sheep or something roaming between the granite banks of the road. You wouldn't get a blip from that."

"But there's definitely something going on. That surge in the phone voltage. The engineers didn't explain it."

"It came from the mine. I know that. I don't know why. There seems to be a lot of loose power about at certain times. Remember the barn. Is everything else normal?"

"No. There's a lot more interference with the receivers here."

"Perhaps your echo might be something to do with that."

"Could be, only it seems to be moving your way all the time."

"Well, I'll have another look."

Barker: "It's getting close to estimated time of arrival, isn't it?"

Johnny: "I don't know for sure. I thought I'd made that clear! Why do you always want bloody figures? They don't matter!"

"Well, all right. Just keep watching that road. Ring back or I'll come in again in fifteen minutes."

"Don't keep ringing. It drives me up the wall. I'll call if there is anything. Aren't you getting any radio from me?"

"It comes in and out. Useless. Can't sort much of it from the interference. The phone's the only reliable line. Bowater said it would be."

Johnny went up to the roof again. The dog went too. The dog was getting restless, then, as if he knew something was going to come, and soon. The evening was blue and still, the sky clear, the mine ruins golden piles against the browning green of the hill. Nothing moved at all.

Then the dog started to whimper and wag his tail. Johnny watched the hill with the naval glasses. The dog started to bark. Johnny was shaken. He still couldn't see anything moving on the hill. The dog barked more and ran back to the stairs.

Johnny shouted to it to stop. The dog paused, cocked his head, looking down the stairs. Then he ran to the parapet overlooking the street.

Johnny couldn't believe his ears. There were small, swift clicks of footsteps down in the street.

Johnny shouted. "Who's there?" It was so loud it jarred the little tape in his pocket. There was a thin, distant voice on the tape, untranslatable.

He ran down the stairs, flight after flight, the dog tearing behind him, barking. Both were suddenly animated by the presence of a human being in that empty town. They came to the landing outside the office. The

quick little footfalls were coming up the stairs, then stopped. There was a silence.

Then Johnny said: "Leila, for Christ's sake!"

She said: "I had to come back."

"Not now. For God's sake, not now! Why did you come? You know—"

"I had to come," Leila said. "There's something you've got to know. There was no other way. I had to come."

"You could have used Barker's phone!"

"They wouldn't let me. It's all sealed off back there. Barker isn't in charge. He's just the stooge to keep you talking. They've made a fool of you. They don't intend to do what they told you!"

"It doesn't matter what they're going to do. It's too late to change anything. It'll be coming soon now. You can't stay here. You know it's bound to come for me. It's got to. Like Camm! It's got to!"

"You don't understand. You don't know!"

"Nor do you. My car's back on the park. Get it and go, Leila. You can't stay here!"

"Listen to me a minute, will you? Listen to me!"

"You're stark bonkers! Do you want to die? Get out of here. You won't have any chance if once he starts coming!"

She screamed to shout him down.

"They're going to try and kill it! They're going to try and destroy it!"

There was a pause.

"You're daft, Leila. They wouldn't dare!"

"They will. They've got rockets all set up round, trained on the hill. As soon as it comes out—"

There was a long pause.

"Jesus Christ!" Johnny said. "Don't they understand?"

Then he turned and ran into the office and took a phone. It screamed. Just nothing else but a scream.

"What the hell's happened?"

"Is it through?" Leila said, and went to the switch-board.

"It's got to be. You can't unplug now—"

The scream stopped as he hung up.

"So the phone's gone at last," he said. "That means they won't know. I can't tell them now! They won't know when it comes!"

"They have an automatic thing linked up. It will fire the rockets when—when—"

"It'll be jammed! It's all being jammed!"

"It's being done with light, not radio."

"Who told you, then? How do you know?"

"Barker said, 'We'll save him!' I said how? And Bowater went into a shrieking temper about it. They arrested him."

"Who did?"

"Defence Intelligence. They just dragged him out. Think! A man like that!"

"The bogies are in command today. It doesn't matter who you are. The political bogies. The Fear Merchants. The Brink Men. The Idiot Lemmings. The Autokropos. The bloody bastards!"

There was a pause. He seemed to be crying, then.

"Come out of it, Johnny."

"You don't understand. It won't kill me."

"They will. The Lemmings. They'll kill you. It's only three miles to the hill. They'll blanket all round. They'll wreck all this in sheer panic. They won't just take a shot. They'll plaster all round. Bowater said so. Come out of it, Johnny! Let's go now. They fooled you."

"They must have changed their minds. It was agreed—"

"Nothing was agreed. Please come, Johnny. Please come!"

"Why? Why do it at all? Why must they?"

"Because they think if they can kill this and examine

it, they can find a way of defence against any more coming!"

"But why keep on thinking everything is hostile to Man? Why keep on like that? Why go on making enemies to kill?"

He started to walk to the door.

"Are you coming, Johnny?"

"No. I'm going up to the hill."

"Oh no, no! Don't—"

"I'm going up the hill. You take my car and get out. There's another—What's the matter with the dog? Look! Look at him!"

"Oh my God!"

"He's coming! He's coming now! Run, Leila! Get the car! Run, run, run!"

And then there is a roar on the tapes, a recognisable roar, the searing blast of a nuclear warhead going off in the square. Then another, a third, and soon the whole tape is roaring, rumbling, crashing, tearing, and abruptly, it stops. St. Cary is falling all round it.

From the highest roof in Saltash we saw the mushroom clouds rolling up, but over St. Cary, not the hill. They rose like monsters into the empty sky, rolling bellies of fire, the mushrooms of slaughter, the toadstools of hell. There was a lot of shouting from the Defence. The things were off track, but the attackers had taken a risk of using automatic firing at a time when they knew every bloody electronic device they had was being jammed. To fire them off had been a disastrous breach of faith, but it had also been monumental stupidity. Once they had set them they couldn't stop them. The mushrooms rose all round, anywhere, scattered about round St. Cary, the sounds of destruction coming slowly across the tormented air.

And then there was a blasting split of light from the

hill. The sky darkened against it and the toadstools stood black and still, as in a film suddenly negatived. It was a flash and that was all, for then there was no more than a single, burning little star in the highest part of the sky, a million miles above the poison clouds. It happened so swiftly that we saw that split of light and the final burning point in the sky in the instant before we were struck blind by the brilliance of it, the last negative of the vanishing star still burning on our eyelids.

I went back into St. Cary with the decontam squads. There were few buildings standing whole. Rubble and wreckage spilled out everywhere. The office had the windows blown away and the walls were scorched, but the shell was still there.

We found poor Leila in the wreck of the office. She was smiling, as the others had been, no mark of violence on her.

There was no trace at all of Johnny but his clothes, the watch, the collar, the little tape in his pocket. He had gone like Camm, to the stars, where Man's instinct, as Camm had always said, still remains to tell him that sooner or later, this is where he must go.

They found the Bridge, these two. The Bridge that leads to the Universe, but which outlawed them from us. By some staggering accident they established contact across unimagined time and space with a mighty intellect that received them for the earnest little animals they were, and tried so patiently to teach them the ways the journey must take.

The Mighty can be generous. Sometimes I like to think Camm and Johnny might have been ambassadors of a kind. That even the Great had something to learn from them. That sometime, someday, the two might come back and try and teach something of what they've learnt. Sometime, someday, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps in a million years.

And perhaps the secret isn't so great a mystery as we think. Perhaps the key to life is simple. Perhaps a good deal simpler than it seems. Perhaps it even allows for the ordinary simplicity of animals. That goddamned dog went too.

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THE BEAST

It began with the sound of a beating heart...
four thousand feet below the surface
of the earth. Something was living down there,
in a strange void that refused to
respond to science's probings: an impossible
life living in an impossible place.
An impossible life that had known birth in a time
before Earth's fiery surfaces had cooled!

And now that life was awakening,
stirring under the probe of men who were
unable to refrain from questioning the
unexplained... stirring, and preparing to come
forth from its ages-old resting place.

Men wanted to believe that the creature
would be friendly... but it came from a world
that existed before men were created.

How could it find kinship with
such totally strange creatures... and would it
even be able to recognize that men
were intelligent, rational beings?